Impious Renewal

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Impious Renewal: The Holocaust and Jewish American Fiction After Postmodernism

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Yet I cannot accept [George] Steiner's suggestion that *silence* is the answer, that it is best "not to add the trivia of literary, sociological debate to the unspeakable." Nor do I agree with the idea that "in the presence of certain realities art is trivial or impertinent." I find a touch of piety in this, especially inasmuch as Steiner has not remained silent. And surely, almost cosmic in its incomprehensibility as it may appear, the embodiment of evil which Auschwitz has become remains impenetrable only so long as we shrink from trying to penetrate it, however inadequately; and Steiner himself adds immediately that the next best thing is "to try and understand."

William Styron, *Sophie's Choice*

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PART III • (POST-)POSTMODERNISM

Introduction

In a period when consensus about the meaning and value of history and culture has become a scarce commodity, World War II stands out as a rare set of historical events of singular and by and large undisputed importance. The memory of the Holocaust in particular functions as a benchmark in understanding contemporary history and culture, and indeed, phrases like "after Auschwitz" and "post-Holocaust" are frequently used to characterize the nature of our contemporary day and age. Much more than temporal labels, these terms in fact suggest a sense in which the history of the Holocaust has inalterably shaped our very culture and consciousness.

It might seem, then, that nothing has changed since George Steiner famously observed in 1963 that "[w]e come *after*, and that is the nerve of our condition. After the unprecedented ruin of humane values and hopes by the political bestiality of our age."[1] Steiner argued that one cannot live in or even presume to grasp the contemporary period without directly taking into account the one immediately preceding it. "We cannot act now," he writes, "be it as critics or merely as rational human beings, as if nothing of vital relevance had happened to our sense of human possibility, as if the extermination by hunger or violence of some seventy million men, women, and children in Europe and Russia between 1914 and 1945 had not altered, profoundly, the quality of our awareness" (4). Beside the sheer magnitude of the violence visited upon the world, what is most alarming to Steiner is the fact that it arose *within* the heart of civilization and was indeed produced *by* civilization.[2] In unleashing this orgy of violence

1 George Steiner, *Language and Silence: Essays on Language, Literature, and the Inhuman* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998), 4. Hereafter cited in the text.

2 "The blackness of it did not spring up in the Gobi Desert or the rain forests of the

culminating in the Holocaust, civilization seems to have effectively destroyed itself: after Auschwitz, Steiner argues, "[t]he house of classic humanism, the dream of reason which animated Western society, have largely broken down. Ideas of cultural development, of inherent rationality … can no longer be asserted with much confidence" (ix). For Steiner, and indeed for many other "post-Holocaust" thinkers such as Theodor Adorno, Elie Wiesel, and Jean-François Lyotard, once-valued notions like progress, reason, ethics, morality, art, and meaning itself in this context now seem hollow, false, and even potentially dangerous. As a result, as Eric Santner notes, "[a]fter Auschwitz—after this trauma to European modernity—critical theory becomes in large part an ongoing elaboration of a seemingly endless series of 'no longer possibles.'"[3]

However important and influential this tradition of post-Holocaust critical theory that Santner refers to may be, its discourse of "no longer possibles" seems to have reached its limits. It can no longer adequately account for the multitude of ways in which the memory of the Holocaust circulates in the present. By the same token, the discourse of "no longer possibles," a language of profound cultural disillusionment, no longer appears to offer an entirely current diagnosis of the contemporary period itself. This is by no means to challenge the significance of the Holocaust as a historical as well as cultural and intellectual watershed. But almost seventy years after the end of World War II, we may have to broaden our view to get into clear focus not only the significance of this watershed, but also what has happened *since* it. Indeed, we have to entertain the notion that "after Auschwitz" may mean something very different in the 2010s than it did in the 1960s.[4]

Up until recently, however, this is not an idea that many Holocaust writers and scholars have been willing to consider. The discourse of "no longer possibles" in fact goes hand in hand with a broadly felt intellectual consensus that the Holocaust represents something unspeakable, unrepresentable, and beyond rational understanding—a complete rupture with everything we once seemed to know. On such a view, to historicize this rupture, let alone the rhetoric of the rupture, would be to reduce the Ho-

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Amazon," Steiner points out. "It rose from within, and from the core of civilization. … In our own day the high places of literacy, of philosophy, of artistic expression, became the setting for Belsen." Steiner, *Language and Silence*, viii–ix.

3 Eric Santner, *Stranded Objects: Mourning, Memory, and Film in Postwar Germany* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), 8–9.

4 Moreover, we must entertain the notion that it may mean something different in different places around the world.

locaust to a critical or scholarly understanding. And it is precisely such an endeavor that has become delegitimized by the Holocaust and has indeed become no longer possible.[5] Moreover, to presume to think or speak the Holocaust by making recourse to any of the traditional (scholarly) discourses would not only be impossible, but also quite improper. "Auschwitz negates all literature as it negates all theories and doctrines," Elie Wiesel argues; "to lock it into a philosophy means to restrict it. To substitute words, any words, for it is to distort it."[6]

In recent years, however, this position has become more and more untenable. In fact, critics have increasingly taken issue with what they consider its restrictive and ultimately self-defeating moral and intellectual stringency. The philosopher Gillian Rose, for instance, was one of the first to openly question and criticize this perspective on the Holocaust. Rose identifies a widespread rhetoric of the "ineffable" with regard to the Holocaust in philosophical, theological, and more popular discourse. She suggests that this rhetoric of ineffability, far from being the "proper" response to the Holocaust, may in fact represent a potentially dangerous moral and intellectual retreat. As Rose puts it, "[t]o argue for silence, prayer, the banishment equally of poetry and knowledge, in short, the witness of 'ineffability,' that is, non-representability, is *to mystify something we dare not understand*, because we fear that it may be all too understandable, all too continuous with what we are—human, all too human."[7] Rose characterizes this position as "Holocaust piety," which has proven to be a term that stuck. In fact, whereas until recently it was quite common to find references to the ineffability of Auschwitz in the work of the most cutting-edge cultural theorists, today it is becoming quite as common to find critics taking issue with this Holocaust piety, pointing out its flaws and blind spots and warning against its potential risks.

Arguably, however, it is in the arts and in popular culture that Holocaust piety is challenged most seriously today. This challenge takes shape in two distinct ways. First, the staggering quantity of Holocaust film, literature, television, art, and museums bears witness not to the idea that

5 In this vein, Jean-François Lyotard for instance famously likened the Holocaust to "an earthquake [that] destroys not only lives, buildings, and objects but also the instruments used to measure earthquakes directly and indirectly." Jean-François Lyotard, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 56.

6 Elie Wiesel, "A Plea for the Surivors," in *A Jew Today* (New York: Vintage, 1979), 234.

7 Gillian Rose, *Mourning Becomes the Law: Philosophy and Representation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 43.

the Holocaust is unspeakable and unrepresentable; quite the contrary, it shows that the Holocaust has been spoken and has been represented over and over again. There is an irony here: many of the critics who argued for the ineffability of the Holocaust agitated precisely against what they saw as the abominations and indecencies of popular Holocaust representations—from Broadway's and Hollywood's *The Diary of the Anne Frank* to the NBC miniseries *Holocaust*, or Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List*. However, as the Holocaust passes out of living memory and is turning into an increasingly mediated cultural memory, it seems a lost battle to maintain, like Elie Wiesel, that "the Holocaust is not a subject like all the others," and that it for that reason "imposes certain limits."[8] Whether we like it or not, popular culture's embrace of the Holocaust seems irreversible as well as unstoppable. Moreover, in the light of the fact that there is practically not a single dimension of the known history of the Holocaust that has not been screened, novelized, painted, or sculpted, it appears that there are indeed no limits to representation. This is by no means an argument to let go of all critical distinctions. Indeed, with the Holocaust as much as with any other subject, there are successful popular representations as well as less successful ones, and there is no denying that some may even be outright offensive.

The second way in which the arts and popular culture challenge Holocaust piety is arguably more interesting from a critical perspective. Most popular representations of the Holocaust are fairly conventional in terms of form and content—and this is precisely the reason that many scholars are critical of them. Yet a distinct trend appears to have emerged over the past decade and a half in which the Holocaust is represented in ways that openly and seemingly self-consciously flout both the conventional, popular norms of Holocaust representation as well at the more "high cultural" ones associated with Holocaust piety. In fact, as Matthew Boswell and others have also suggested, this trend may be termed Holocaust *im*piety.[9] Thus, artists have sought to engage with the Holocaust using genre conventions and styles that at first sight seem wholly incongruous with the

8 Elie Wiesel, "Art and the Holocaust: Trivializing Memory," *New York Times*, June 11, 1989. http://www.nytimes.com/1989/06/11/movies/art-and-the-holocaust-trivializing-memory.html?pagewanted=all&src=pm.

9 Matthew Boswell, *Holocaust Impiety in Literature, Popular Music, and Film* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012). Boswell suggests that Holocaust impiety has a venerable history with roots going back to the war period itself. I think he is correct, but I would add that this impious tradition has become increasingly visible and significant in the past fifteen years or so.

tragic reality of this history. Examples are plentiful and highly diverse, but would certainly include Roberto Benigni's tragicomic film *Life Is Beautiful* (*La Vita è Bella*, 1997), Art Spiegelman's graphic novel *Maus* (1991), as well as highly playful and irreverent art works such as the Holocaust Lego of the Polish artist Zbigniew Libera or the toy-like miniature scenes from Auschwitz by David Levinthal. Another noteworthy "scandalous" development is the shift of focus from the perspective of the (Jewish) victims toward that of the perpetrators, as in Oliver Hirschbiegel's empathetic portrayal of Hitler's last days in the film *Downfall* (*Der Untergang*, 2004), or Jonathan Littell's grotesque novel *The Kindly Ones* (*Les Bienveillantes*, 2006) about the ruthless and psychopathic SD officer Maximilien Aue. Finally, some artists openly and blithely disregard and distort the historical record altogether, as does Michael Chabon in his novel *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* (2007), which I will discuss in some more detail below, and much more radically even, Quentin Tarantino in his movie *Inglourious Basterds* (2009), an ultraviolent and absurd fantasy of Jewish revenge.

These various forms of Holocaust impiety in literature and the arts flout the received norms of Holocaust discourse in ways that may sometimes be quite shocking and even offensive. Yet it would be a mistake to see this as a confirmation of Elie Wiesel's famous disqualifications of Holocaust literature, or his suggestion that "[a] novel about Majdanek is about blasphemy. *Is* blasphemy."[10] In fact, a dismissal of these works of Holocaust impiety as perverse exploitations of memory would fail to do justice to the very complexity and significance of these cultural expressions: it is precisely by means of their incongruous and often irreverent engagements with the Holocaust that these works offer and provoke reflection on such matters as the nature of memory, its relation to identity, as well as the problematics and possibilities of representation. To appreciate these complex processes of cultural memory, however, requires approaching these works much more on their own terms as contemporary fictional engagements with the Holocaust. And this, in turn, is possible only on the basis of a more informed and sophisticated account of what it means to represent the Holocaust in fiction, and in literature and art more generally.

Generations of scholars and critics have questioned the possibility and morality of representing the Holocaust, let alone in literature and fiction.

10 Elie Wiesel, "The Holocaust as Literary Inspiration," in *Dimensions of the Holocaust: Lectures at Northwestern University*, ed. Elie Wiesel, Lucy S. Dawidowicz, Dorothy Rabinowitz, and Robert McAfee Brown (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University, 1977), 7.

Yet today it is increasingly being understood that there is no way of studying, understanding, and remembering the Holocaust *without* representation or *outside* the symbolic order. Indeed, "[r]ather than seeing metaphors as threatening to the facts of the Holocaust," James E. Young points out, "we must recognize that they are our only access to the facts, which cannot exist apart from the figures delivering them to us."[11] Consequently, it is misguided to dismiss literary and fictional representations of the past for being non-factual, metaphorical, and "made-up," since the traditionally much-preferred discourses of history and testimony are themselves no less constructed—that is, dependent on language and metaphor. Far from being inferior to history and testimony, then, literature and the arts in fact play a crucial part *alongside* these other genres in constructing and mediating our knowledge and understandings of the past. In fact, fiction should not be seen as the opposite of history and testimony, but neither should the latter be viewed as "mere" fictions. Instead, they each constitute distinct (literary) *genres* that represent the past in various ways and in different modes, but all of them inevitably and necessarily rely on language and metaphor. This is not to undermine historical knowledge as such, but rather to emphasize that "literary and historical truths of the Holocaust may not be entirely separable," as Young puts it.[12] And what is therefore significant about the works of Holocaust impiety is not so much that they would obscure the past; rather, as popular and much-discussed representations of the Holocaust, they are central and significant texts that mediate the memory of the Holocaust in the present. To dismiss or to ignore these and other literary and fictional representations of the Holocaust would therefore result in remaining blind to a large dimension of how contemporary culture actually makes sense of the Holocaust. As the eminent scholar Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi has famously observed, "[t]he Holocaust has already engendered more historical research than any single event in Jewish history, but I have no doubt whatever that its image is being shaped, not at the historian's anvil, but in the novelist's crucible."[13] In other words, Holocaust fictions actually *matter*.

However, Holocaust fictions matter not simply because they are there; rather, they are there and they matter because they fulfill specific func-

11 James E. Young, *Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust: Narrative and the Consequences of Interpretation* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990), 1.

12 Ibid., 1.

13 Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1996), 98.

tions, answering to specific needs and requirements. Unlike history and testimony, for instance, which are bound by such tropes as facticity and truthfulness, literature and fiction are limited in principle by nothing but language and the imagination itself. Thus, literature and art more generally offer ways of approaching and engaging with the history of the Holocaust that are unavailable by any other means. And for that reason, literature and art constitute a vital means by which people relate to the past. With regard to Holocaust impiety, it is indeed the fictional mode that allows these works to unrestrainedly address the Holocaust, resulting in an approach to this history that freely and openly flouts the received norms and pieties of Holocaust discourse. As such, these works may foster, for instance, the construction of affective and empathetic relationships to the past. More significantly, however, it is precisely their impiety that provokes reflection upon the processes of remembrance itself and upon the (changing) meaning of the Holocaust in the present. Indeed, as Matthew Boswell suggests, Holocaust impiety does not so much "fictionalise" the Holocaust as such; "rather, [it] can be defined as the flagrant articulation of the *friction* that is produced by the coming together of fact and fiction, experience and imagination, history and culture, all within the context of fading social memory."[14]

Unlike any other genre, then, impious Holocaust fictions, even if they may admittedly give short shrift to memorialization of the past as such, provoke one to constantly and self-critically review and scrutinize contemporary relationships to the past. Addressing not only the past itself but also the ways in which it is remembered in the present, they may thus also help to bring into focus significant changes in the very make-up and ever ongoing reconstruction of the contemporary itself. Recent forms of Holocaust impiety suggest that it is necessary to move beyond thinking of the post-Holocaust present in the restrictive and suffocating terms of "no longer possibles." Surprisingly, perhaps, they may be seen as attempts to explore new, more flexible, and more productive possibilities of remembrance, representation, and signification in a changing and yet invariably post-Holocaust contemporary. Indeed, in many of these works, it is precisely the irreverence that marks their treatment of the memory of the Holocaust that simultaneously intimates possibilities of various forms of *renewal*.

One central example here is offered by Jewish American fiction of the last fifteen years. In this period, some of the most successful writing by

14 Boswell, *Holocaust Impiety*, 33.

a new generation of relatively young Jewish American authors has been notably concerned with the memory of the Holocaust. In their fiction, Michael Chabon, Jonathan Safran Foer, Nicole Krauss, and Nathan Englander engage with the memory of the Holocaust frequently, intensely, and often profoundly, yet in ways that seem to defy the established pieties surrounding the memory of the Holocaust. They approach the Holocaust often quite playfully and comically, with a distinct sense of irreverence and impiety, and yet their efforts are not so much corrosive and destructive but much rather affirmative and constructive. As they impiously subvert established norms of Holocaust discourse, they demonstrate a new commitment to somehow make sense of this history, but also an awareness of the profound problems such an ambition faces. It is precisely through impiety then that this new "after Auschwitz" generation subscribes to the continuing significance of the Holocaust. Yet at the same time, their impiety suggests that the memory of the Holocaust retains its significance *only* through constant redefinition and rearticulation and as part of an ongoing negotiation between the demands and concerns of the past and those of the present and future.

In interesting ways, many such tensions come to the foreground in Michael Chabon's *The Yiddish Policemen's Union*. This novel offers a classic American detective story in which the reader follows homicide detective Meyer Landsman and his partner as they work on the murder case of a Jewish junkie, in which process they manage to uncover a much larger Jewish terrorist complot. What is significant about the novel, however, is that its plot unravels against a very peculiar historical and geographical backdrop: in fact, it is situated in an alternative history in which the Holocaust as we know it never took place. Instead, after the Nazis had managed to kill no less than two million Jews, the American government granted the remainder of the Jews of Europe a safe haven in Sitka, Alaska, of all places. From the mid-1940s onward, millions of Jewish refugees flock into Sitka, turning the Alaskan frontier town into a Jewish American *shtetl*, where instead of English (or Hebrew) people speak Yiddish. In a podcast interview with the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Chabon explained this highly unlikely setup by saying that "I think in *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* I tried to use my imagination to undo at least some of the effects of the Holocaust, and to imagine a way out of the catastrophe."[15]

15 Michael Chabon, interview by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, March 13, 2008, https://ushmm.org/museum/exhibit/focus/antisemitism/voices/transcript/index.php?content=20080313.

To those skeptical about Holocaust fiction, Chabon's comment and indeed the entire novel it refers to may represent the incarnations of their worst fears and concerns about the genre. The attempt "to imagine a way out of the catastrophe" seems to go right against the need to bear witness valued so highly by the survivors; in fact, serving as the vehicle for a detective story, this patently imaginary engagement with the Holocaust may seem an appropriation of horror for purely trivial ends. As such, it may even come dangerously close to that ultimate form of sacrilege: Holocaust denial. Such a reading, however, fails to see that Chabon does not simply commit impiety for the sake of impiety itself, but that something much more tangled and complicated is at stake. As Chabon points out in the same podcast interview, it "is part of the legacy of my generation following the Holocaust—to have those powerful feelings of wishing it were not so, wishing it could be undone, and trying to understand how it did happen, partly in order to go through that process of wishing it otherwise." It seems much more interesting, then, to consider Chabon's engagement with the Holocaust in *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* not as a form of callous blasphemy, but as the linchpin to a highly complex and mediated engagement with history, identity, and the possibilities of literary art itself in a period of destabilizing uncertainties. In fact, in this study I will demonstrate at length that similar points can be made about Chabon's other Holocaust-centered fictions, as well as those of his literary fellow-travelers, Jonathan Safran Foer, Nicole Krauss, and Nathan Englander.[16]

If all of these authors' various forms of Holocaust impiety do not merely represent sacrilege, but something more complex, subtle, and mediated, the critical question that emerges at this point is that of how exactly to understand such contemporary engagements with the Holocaust. In recent

16 I have in mind, specifically: Chabon's Pulitzer Prize-winning *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay* (2000), and his novella *The Final Solution* (2005); Jonathan Safran Foer's *Everything Is Illuminated* (2002); Nathan Englander's short story "The Tumblers" (1999) as well as his novel *The Ministry of Special Cases* (2007); and, finally, Nicole Krauss's *The History of Love* (2005) and *Great House* (2010). All of these works are discussed in detail in this study, except Chabon's *The Final Solution*. I have chosen to leave out this work for reasons of economy, as I already analyze two voluminous novels by Chabon in considerable detail (however, an excellent analysis of this novella is offered by Stef Craps and Gert Buelens in their article "Traumatic Mirrorings: Holocaust and Colonial Trauma in Michael Chabon's *The Final Solution*." *Criticism* 53, no. 4 (Fall 2011): 569–586, doi: 10.1353/crt.2011.0035.). I also do not discuss Englander's recent collection of short stories *What We Talk About When We Talk About Anne Frank* (2012). Though this collection features a number of Holocaust-centered stories, it appeared at a moment when this study had already reached an advanced state of completion.

years, one very popular trend has been to seek answers to this and similar questions in (cultural) trauma theory and to systematically analyze (contemporary) representations of the Holocaust under the sign of a dynamic of trauma.[17]

Cultural trauma theory emerged over the course of the 1990s as a symbiosis between deconstructivist and Freudian thought. In very general terms, it is concerned with questions of how traumatic events register or, more precisely, fail to register fully, in culture. Cathy Caruth, one of the foremost trauma theorists, suggests that trauma may be thought of as "the wound of the mind" that, unlike a physical wound, "is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor."[18] What is significant about Caruth's notion of trauma is that it is not just about individual psychology, but that trauma manifests itself on the level of the symbolic order, which is inherently a socio-cultural and communicative domain. Indeed, for Caruth, trauma "is always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available" (4). This also explains the significance of trauma to literature and literary studies: as Caruth sees it, it is precisely in literature and through literary analysis—forms of writing that are "interested in the complex relation between knowing and not knowing" (3)—that it is possible to get a sense of the traumatic as that which cannot be fully communicated.[19] Indeed, through literary analysis of both cultural and psychoanalytical texts, Caruth seeks to identify a dimension of these texts "that cannot be

17 Some significant examples would be: Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, M.D. *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (New York and London: Routledge, 1992); E. Ann Kaplan, *Trauma Culture: The Politics of Terror and Loss in Media and Literature* (New Brunswick, New Jersey, and London: Rutgers University Press, 2005); Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory* (Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 1997); Dominick LaCapra, *History and Memory After Auschwitz* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998); Ernst Van Alphen, *Caught by History: Holocaust Effects in Contemporary Art, Literature, and Theory* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997); Joshua Hirsch, *Afterimage: Film, Trauma, and the Holocaust* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2003).

18 Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1996), 4. Hereafter cited in the text.

19 As Caruth puts it, "it is at the specific point at which knowing and not knowing intersect that the language of literature and the psychoanalytic theory of traumatic experience precisely meet" (3).

reduced to the thematic content of the text or to what the theory encodes, and that, beyond what we can know or theorize about it, stubbornly persists in bearing witness to some forgotten wound" (5).

Of course, trauma has in recent decades become something of a valorized trope in social discourse, lending groups and individuals a sense of identity and even social prestige. Moreover, trauma theory itself has not only tended to focus on the Holocaust as the paradigmatic trauma case, it has in recent years increasingly studied and emphasized the intergenerational transmission of trauma as well.[20] These are all significant factors that would seem to recommend trauma theory as an appropriate conceptual framework for reading the Holocaust-centered fictions of authors like Chabon, Englander, Foer, and Krauss. The latter two are in fact grandchildren of Holocaust survivors, and works like Foer's *Everything Is Illuminated* and Krauss's *The History of Love* are much concerned with the issue of how historical trauma affects succeeding generations. As Philippe Codde observes, these "novels … are haunted by the spectral traces of those lost in the Holocaust. These elusive characters and traumatic historical events are evoked but never looked at directly; they are metonymically resuscitated in an attempt to counter the frustrating inevitability of destructive historical processes."[21] By such aesthetic means, then, these novels appear very much to evoke a dynamic of trauma.

Still, I harbor some fundamental reservations about reading the writing of Foer, Krauss, Chabon, and Englander from a trauma perspective, and indeed about the very assumptions underlying cultural trauma theory as a whole. Though a number of problems might be identified in trauma

20 A concept like Marianne Hirsch's "postmemory," introduced in her study *Family Frames*, is significant in this respect. "[P]ostmemory," Hirsch writes,

> is distinguished from memory by generational distance and from history by deep personal connection. Postmemory is a powerful and very particular form of memory precisely because its connection to its object or source is mediated not through recollection but through an imaginative investment and creation. This is not to say that memory itself is unmediated, but that it is more directly connected to the past. Postmemory characterizes the experience of those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are evacuated by the stories of the previous generation shaped by traumatic events that can be neither understood nor recreated. (22)

21 Philippe Codde, "Keeping History at Bay: Absent Presences in Three Recent Jewish American Novels," *Modern Fiction Studies* 57, no. 4 (Winter 2011): 677, doi: 10.1353/mfs.2011.0097.

theory, my most fundamental concerns center on the concept of trauma itself and on the issue of representation. To take the former first, the ways in which Caruth and other trauma theorists extrapolate from psychoanalysis and turn trauma into a concept operating on the level not just of individual psychology but of culture are intensely problematic. To the extent that trauma is conceptualized in terms of the impossibility of incorporating experience into the order of language and knowledge, trauma theory still finds itself in touch with much of the broader scholarship on trauma—from psychoanalysis to contemporary psychiatry.[22] Within this large body of scholarship, these processes of frustrated articulation are generally referred to as *symptoms* of an underlying psychological affliction experienced on the level of the subject. Cultural trauma theory, however, singles out as the object of interest and analysis these representational difficulties, but in the process, it obscures their connection to lived (individual) experience and psychology. As Amy Hungerford notes, Caruth suggests that "the experience of trauma can be cut free of the person to whom the trauma happens"; subsequently, "[e]xperience, like a lost glove, can be 'claimed' or left 'unclaimed.'" The point of this theoretical maneuver, Hungerford points out, is that "[b]y cutting experience free from the subject of experience, Caruth allows trauma not only to be abstract in the extreme but also, by virtue of that abstraction, to be transmissible."[23] In such a way, an essentially psychological conceptualization of trauma would become relevant not only to psychoanalysis (and related fields), but to *cultural* analysis as well.

Yet such a "culturalized" conceptualization of trauma presents a number of problems. As trauma freely circulates in culture and invades the domains

22 For instance, with regard to the current notion of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, Ruth Leys points out,

> [t]he idea is that, owing to the emotions of terror and surprise caused by certain events, the mind is split or dissociated: it is unable to register the wound to the psyche because the ordinary mechanisms of awareness and cognition are destroyed. As a result, the victim is unable to recollect and integrate the hurtful experience in normal consciousness; instead, she is haunted or possessed by intrusive traumatic memories. The experience of the trauma, fixed or frozen in time, refuses to be represented *as* past, but is perpetually reexperienced in a painful, dissociated, traumatic present.

Ruth Leys, *Trauma: A Genealogy* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 2. Italics in original.

23 Amy Hungerford, *The Holocaust of Texts: Genocide, Literature, and Personification* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), 114–115.

of literature, culture, and history, it remains profoundly ambiguous what exactly trauma means, does, or effectuates in these new contexts.[24] Trauma theorists tend to identify a host of traumatic phenomena in cultural texts, from the loss of speech, to repression, as well as nightmarish or spectral returns of the repressed. But it is often unclear whether they describe the *symptoms* of a traumatized culture or discourse, which may then be read in ways analogical to the traumatized mind of an individual, or whether they use psychoanalytical terminology as *metaphors* to characterize a cultural dynamic. Both approaches in fact are problematic, because, operating on the separation between trauma and experience, each turns trauma into a highly abstract, general, and undifferentiated concept in order to denote culture's relationship to catastrophe. Yet this is to inevitably reduce the multitude of ways in which catastrophic events are mediated in culture—a process which seems subject not only to psychological complications but also to a range of complexly interrelated social, political, ideological, cultural, and aesthetic negotiations. Indeed, "while it is appropriate to insist on a troubling element of undecidability in all processes of communication," Wulf Kansteiner has observed, "it is neither necessary nor advisable to express this essential dilemma of representation through the metaphor of trauma. Just because trauma is inevitably a problem of representation in memory and communication does not imply the reverse, i.e. that problems of representation are always partaking in the traumatic."[25]

24 This is not to suggest that trauma strictly *cannot* be communicated and transmitted. In fact, confronting representations of traumatizing experience can be an unsettling and indeed potentially traumatizing experience. But it seems highly questionable to suppose that the experience on the receiving end is on a par with, or even identical to, the traumatic experience represented. As Hungerford notes, "[i]t seems important, if only in the interest of accuracy, to distinguish this experience of trauma [i.e. the potentially traumatic experience of reading, watching, or listening to a representation of trauma], if one wishes to call it that, from the trauma that the survivor herself has experienced and then represents in her testimony." Hungerford, *The Holocaust of Texts*, 105.

25 Wulf Kansteiner, "Genealogy of a Category Mistake: A Critical Intellectual History of the Cultural Trauma Metaphor," *Rethinking History* 8, no. 2 (June 2004): 205, doi: 10.1080/1364252041000168390 5. "Even if certain analogies exist," Kansteiner continues,

> we have to acknowledge that the dilemmas of representation and the distress of trauma never carry the same effect, intensities and risks. Therefore, it is disappointing that none of the intellectuals discussed above [i.e. the trauma theorists discussed by Kansteiner] have developed theoretically ambitious *and* historically precise analyses of the social, cultural, and psychological consequences of extreme violence and manmade disasters. (205)

Kansteiner's comment in fact points to the second problem in trauma theory, namely the matter of the representation of trauma. Caruth and other trauma theorists effectively suggest that traumatic experience registers not just on the level of individual subjectivity, but is in fact encoded necessarily on the level of cultural texts as well. Through the analysis of these cultural texts, then, we may uncover unmediated traces of traumatic experience, or, alternatively, symbolic manifestations of trauma that adhere to a unique organization which is qualitatively different from "ordinary" forms of representation. It is important to emphasize that this position does not uphold a naive realist aesthetic, but that it emerged, rather, as a response to the concern that meaning, reference, and ethics have become impossible in the wake of poststructuralist theory.[26] "Through the notion of trauma," Caruth suggests, "we can understand that a rethinking of reference is aimed not at eliminating history but at resituating it in our understanding, that is, at precisely permitting *history* to arise where *immediate understanding* may not" (11, italics in original). In other words, history emerges not as an object of knowledge, mediated by representation; instead it emerges through representation, yet in defiance or in excess of its incorporating logic, *as trauma*. Yet in taking a position that consciously retreats from poststructuralism's more radical lessons about the tropological nature of *all* representation, Caruth creates more problems than she is able to solve. Even if she usefully draws attention to the ways in which trauma and history affect individuals and culture by means that defy any attempts of ready incorporation, she in the same gesture mystifies rather than elucidates the ways in which culture encounters trauma through representation. Indeed, from Caruth's point of view, there are those texts and genres which are more capable of "permitting *history* to arise where *immediate understanding* may not" than others. Yet this does not take away the fact that history as trauma, even if unamenable to immediate understanding, can only but arise through the medium of language and therefore remains dependent on representation. That is to say, the inchoate, subliminal sense of unmediated history that some cultural texts may convey remains inexorably a textual or tropological effect, created not by trauma itself but by representation.[27] Trauma theory, then, by sidestepping the radical and putatively relativistic poststructuralist insights on representation, and by effectively fetishizing trauma, obscures the complex cultural, political, and

26 Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, 10–11. Hereafter cited in the text.

27 This point is illustrated painfully by the scandal surrounding Binjamin Wilkomirski's Holocaust memoir *Fragments*, which shows that even the (seemingly) most perfect, truthful, and authentic trauma writing can in fact be inauthentic and fake.

historical negotiations by which trauma is inevitably mediated and represented in culture.

In formulating these reservations about trauma theory, I do not mean to dismiss wholly the work on Holocaust literature that has been done under the sign of trauma theory. As metaphors, the categories of trauma may indeed offer a compelling analytical framework for understanding certain textual dynamics or logic. As a master paradigm for the analysis of culture and cultural works, however, its usefulness is severely and insurmountably limited. In fact, it is my contention that the Holocaust impieties of Jewish American authors like Michael Chabon, Jonathan Safran Foer, Nicole Krauss, and Nathan Englander signal something that—perhaps paradoxically—cuts much deeper as well as broader than trauma theory is able to appreciate. They cannot simply be seen as—or reduced to—belated, relatively unmediated expressions of (intergenerational) trauma. Such a perspective would miss the fact that any contemporary engagement with the memory of the Holocaust is inevitably and intrinsically affected by the passing of well over sixty years since the end of the Holocaust, the socio-cultural context of memory, as well the (aesthetic) traditions of representing the Holocaust. In other words, what is needed is a much more multifaceted approach to the Holocaust-centered works of these Jewish American authors; an approach that is much more closely attuned to the complex and broad range of (socio-)historical and critical negotiations that operate in and on this writing and render it meaningful. Consequently, I propose to situate this Jewish American writing not only in the context of (American) Holocaust writing, but also explicitly in that of Jewish American writing, and that of contemporary postmodern writing (or contemporary postmodern*ism* more broadly conceived). Such a tripartite approach is one significant way of ensuring that not only these authors' engagements with the Holocaust as such are scrutinized, but that they are also scrupulously situated in the appropriate local (Jewish, American) and temporal (contemporary, postmodern) contexts.

In fact, from such a perspective, it appears that the engagement with the Holocaust in the fiction of Chabon, Foer, Krauss, and Englander is not so much about trauma, but instead performs, illuminates, and bears witness to much more broadly felt changes in contemporary (Jewish) American culture.[28] More concretely, the Holocaust impieties of these authors partake in an effort of renewal that resonates not only on the level of

28 For accuracy's sake, it is useful to point out that in this study I use the term "America" and its derivatives to refer exclusively to the US.

Holocaust memory, but also and simultaneously on that of Jewish American identity and contemporary postmodernism. As these authors engage with the memory of the Holocaust in new and impious ways, they seek to render this memory meaningful from distinctly contemporary and Americanized perspectives. Thus, what emerges from their novels is not pure, unmediated history as such, but precisely the efforts to make sense of the past in the present, and in ways determined openly and inevitably by the concerns and interests of early twenty-first century America. Among these concerns and interests are the very distance—spatial, temporal, historical, cultural, imaginative—that separates contemporary American reality from that of the Holocaust, but also very much the issue of contemporary Jewish American identity. Indeed, these fictional engagements with the Holocaust must at the same time be read as explorations of the question of what it means to be Jewish in America today: their impious and liberally imaginative approach to the Holocaust—after all, one of the central tenets of contemporary Jewish American identity—suggests that the matter of Jewishness, too, is significant and valuable precisely when amenable to the same impious forms of reinvention and liberal reconstruction as the Holocaust. Strikingly, though, these radical forms of impiety are not so much destructive, relativistic, or iconoclastic per se, but appear rather as committed attempts to reclaim, in and through fiction, some form of signification or common ground in a fragmented and fundamentally instable postmodern world. As such, indeed, they appear precisely as efforts to move *beyond* postmodernism.

To clarify some of the assumptions that underlie the separate elements of this argument as well as the connections between them, it will be helpful to consider in more detail some of the shared characteristics of the work of the four Jewish American authors central to this study. These shared characteristics can perhaps best be understood in generational terms. As a variety of critics have suggested, the ways in which these authors and their work relate to the Holocaust can usefully be characterized as representing a third generation perspective. This term was coined originally to refer to grandchildren of Holocaust survivors, but today the term is often used by literary scholars to refer to Holocaust writing by authors whose grandparents lived through the age of the Holocaust—either as survivors, or simply as contemporaries living at a further remove from the European killing grounds.[29] Jonathan Safran Foer's (maternal) grandparents nar-

29 See, for instance, Jessica Lang, "The History of Love, the Contemporary Reader, and the Transmission of Holocaust Memory," *Journal of Modern Literature* 33, no.

rowly survived the Holocaust; those of Nicole Krauss managed to flee to Britain before the start of World War II, while the grandparents of Michael Chabon and Nathan Englander were in America at the time of the Holocaust. As Chabon was born in 1964 and Foer, Krauss, and Englander in 1977, 1974, and 1970 respectively, the concept of a third generation captures well the generational and accompanying historical and emotional distance these four authors have to the events of the Holocaust.[30]

A generational perspective offers a useful way of making sense of the by now vast field of Holocaust literature. The writing of the first generation is authored by the Nazis' victims and often deals directly with the Holocaust experience: it consists for a large part of relatively realistic and autobiographical narratives about life in the ghettos and concentration camps, or life in hiding. Well-known representatives of this first generation are Elie Wiesel, Primo Levi, Jorge Semprun, Charlotte Delbo, and Anne Frank. The second generation, then, is represented by the children of survivors. In the US, Melvin Jules Bukiet, Thane Rosenbaum, and Art Spiegelman are among the most notable authors representing this perspective. Their works are often strongly informed by the theme of growing up in the shadow of their parents' trauma. Third generation authors, by contrast, are separated from the past even further and are therefore situated in a much more strongly mediated and indirect position towards it. This greater distance has significant effects on the ways in which the memory of the Holocaust is represented in these authors' fiction. Indeed, in third generation writing, the Holocaust is often engaged with from much more oblique angles than in first and second generation Holocaust writing. As Jessica Lang points out, the literature of the third generation

> regularly refers to and incorporates events from the Holocaust, but it also balances and counters these references with other narrative strategies or counterpoints. While for first- and second-generation Holocaust writers the historical experience "conveys" a sense of immediacy and impact, the third

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1 (Fall 2009): 43–56, doi: 10.1353/jml.0.0082; Alan L. Berger, "Unclaimed Experience: Trauma and Identity in Third Generation Writing about the Holocaust," *Shofar* 28, no. 3 (2010): 149–158, doi: 10.1353/sho.0.0453; Ruth Franklin, *A Thousand Darknesses: Lies and Truth in Holocaust Fiction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 235–243.

30 Maybe it is useful, additionally, to point out that I use the term "third generation," not "third generation survivors" or "third generation victims." The use of the phrase "third generation" is meant to indicate the generational distance to the history of the Holocaust of authors born decades after the war, but *not* necessarily inherited suffering (even if this should not be excluded or denied).

generation writer views these events as an indirect part of the narrative, one balanced by other, also important, histories.[31]

Moreover, Emily Miller Budick usefully suggests that much recent Jewish American literature is "Holocaust-inflected rather than about the Holocaust per se. These texts inscribe the Holocaust sometimes silently, sometimes marginally—often in an allusion or phrase or set of images—in their pursuit of their other, more primary agendas, including, and even typically, Jewish identity in the United States."[32]

As both Lang's and Budick's comments highlight, the third generation's relationship to the Holocaust is not only distanced and indirect, but also mediated and refracted by contemporary concerns that may have very little to do with the history of the Holocaust per se. From such a perspective, then, the third generation's characteristically indirect engagements with the Holocaust cannot be reduced to manifestations or signs of trauma, but must be understood in broader contexts of contemporary American life. Indeed, the very fact that these are *American* engagements with the Holocaust has significant repercussions. Of course, the Holocaust took place on European soil, and as a result, American fiction about the Holocaust, including this recent Jewish American writing, is often marked by a certain distanced relationship to this history. Thus, the geographical distance that separates the American experience from the events of the Holocaust is very often a central theme in American Holocaust literature.

But the distanced American relationship to the Holocaust manifests itself not only literally, that is, in geographical terms, but also in cultural terms. Indeed, the American ethos, as an essentially optimistic, life-affirming, forward-looking (and therefore perhaps unhistorical) view on life indelibly affects the ways in which the Holocaust is understood and given shape in American culture. Many critics have decried and lambasted the resulting "Americanization of the Holocaust" for offering a sugar-coated and therefore "false" representation of history. However, such critiques fail to appreciate that any act of remembering and representing the Holocaust is inevitably shaped by the situation and context in which such acts take place. In fact, I propose in chapter 2 that the Americanization of the Ho-

31 Lang, "*The History of Love*," 46.

32 Emily Miller Budick, "The Holocaust in the Jewish American Literary Imagination," in *The Cambridge Companion to Jewish American Literature*, ed. Michael P. Kramer and Hana Wirth-Nesher (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 216. For accuracy's sake, it should be noted that by speaking of "Holocaust-inflected" literature, Budick is not referring exclusively to third generation writing.

locaust represents a way of engaging with the past that is culturally much more complex than is often appreciated. By postulating a distinctly American form of historical consciousness, I suggest that the Americanization of the Holocaust is part of a characteristically American tendency to view the past in overwhelmingly personalized, contemporary, and moral terms, rather than in strictly historical ones. As a product of such an American form of historical consciousness, the Americanization of the Holocaust answers to a more or less coherent inner logic that is itself a product of the US's particular cultural history. Viewing the Americanization of the Holocaust from such a perspective means to be concerned less with how adequately the past per se is represented, but rather with how this process illustrates American culture's distinctive *relationship* toward this particular history. This in fact requires us to look beyond American engagements with the Holocaust as flawed representations of history almost by default and to view them rather as complex and multi-layered *cultural* expressions in their own right: as attempts to deal with the past in ways that are inevitably situational, context-bound, and motivated by highly specific concerns and interests. In fact, American representation of the Holocaust can only be appreciated adequately when such factors are sufficiently taken into account.

In the study of contemporary Holocaust-inflected Jewish American literature, one dimension of this American context that requires particular attention, as Budick also intimates, is that of identity. That is to say, Chabon, Krauss, Foer, and Englander's Holocaust-inflected fictions must be seen not only as contemporary Jewish American discourses on history, but also as discourses on Jewish American identity formation. More significantly even, their respective engagements with the Holocaust partake in explorations of "Jewishness" and Jewish American identity formation that share considerable common ground. In fact, in this particular context, the notion of a third generation is helpful as well, because these authors also represent a third generation (at least) of Jewish Americans—grandchildren, or even further removed, of Jewish immigrants to America—and indeed a third generation of Jewish American *writers*.

Of course, it is this immigrant experience that is traditionally one of Jewish American literature's central themes. In fact, it is what gave birth to this tradition in the first place. The first major works of Jewish American literature—notably those of writers like Abraham Cahan, Anzia Yezierska, Mary Antin, and Henry Roth—are all immigrant novels. Next, the struggle between maintaining Jewish identity and assimilating into American culture—an experience characteristic of the children of immigrants—is one of the themes that profoundly characterizes the fiction of the great

"second generation" of Jewish American writers: Saul Bellow, Bernard Malamud, Philip Roth (who are all, indeed, children of immigrants). But, significantly, these immigration-related themes are much less central in the writing of the present, third, generation. Instead, as well-acculturated, generally not very religious Jewish Americans, for whom the struggle of identity versus assimilation has largely been resolved, these writers produce fiction that can be characterized as "Jewish" not least by its engagement with the Holocaust.[33]

What is important in this respect is that the Jewish American socio-historical context in which this present generation of writers operates is again very different from those of their predecessors. In fact, much of what traditionally defined the Jewish American community has been subjected to considerable erosion in recent decades. Traditional pillars of Jewish American identity—religion, immigrant background, Yiddish, memories of the

33 Of the authors under discussion here, only Nathan Englander, who grew up in an Orthodox environment (with which he broke later in his life), has had a traditional, religious Jewish upbringing. Krauss, Chabon, and Foer's Jewish backgrounds and identities seem to have taken shape mainly along cultural lines. In interviews, they have regularly and interestingly commented on how they experience their Jewish identities. In conversation with the *Sydney Morning Herald*, Michael Chabon offers a commentary on his Jewish identity that may perhaps be seen as paradigmatic of his generation's. To the question of "[*h*]*ow Jewish was your upbringing*," Chabon answers as follows:

> It was somewhat Jewish, fairly Jewish. It's kind of hard to categorise. Definitely high holidays in synagogue, occasionally once a month for Friday night, we would light candles, I had a bar-mitzvah, I went to Hebrew school but we didn't keep kosher and not only that we ate bacon. … I think I have become much more consciously Jewish. Being Jewish for a lot of my early life wasn't that important to me, especially after high school and college and all through my 20s. The first decade after I left home. It meant nothing to me and I didn't think about it and didn't care about it. I didn't see any cost in being Jewish and I didn't see any benefit in it either. I got older and got married and divorced, and my grandparents died. … [I]t wasn't in any conscious way, but after that series of troubles and losses, I started to turn back a little, to look back at what I had left behind. And also not only look back at what I had left behind, but what my parents and grandparents had left behind. The world, the language they had left behind, the culture and civilization.

Referring to *The Yiddish Policemen's Union*, the interviewer then asks, "*The book questions strongly what it means to be Jewish so perhaps you still haven't answered the question?*" Chabon's response: "[y]ou're right, not at all, and I'm still questioning." Michael Chabon, interview by Helen Greenwood, *Sydney Morning Herald*, May 3, 2007, http://www.smh.com.au/news/books/michael-chabon-interview/2007/05/03/1177788267982.html?page=fullpage#contentSwap1.

Old World, political orientation, views on Israel—are still important, but these can no longer unite the Jewish American community as a whole.[34] Moreover, the increasing rate of intermarriage, declining Jewish knowledge and education, declining religious observance, and declining Jewish birthrate lead Seymour M. Lipset and Earl Raab to conclude that among Jewish Americans, "group identity and cohesiveness are severely eroding for the large majority."[35] However, as the historian Peter Novick has demonstrated at length, it is precisely in this context of the apparent disintegration of the Jewish American community and the dilution of Jewish American identity that the memory of the Holocaust became increasingly important. "What American Jews *do* have in common," Novick points out, "is the knowledge that but for their parents' or (more often) grandparents' or great-grandparents' immigration, they would have shared the fate of European Jewry. … The Holocaust, as virtually the only common denominator of American Jewish identity in the late twentieth century, has filled the need for a consensual symbol." In fact, Holocaust discourse, the remembering of this history, has had such resonance among American Jews that Novick speaks of contemporary Jewish American identity as "Holocaust-centered."[36]

On the whole, critics and Jewish leaders have been dismissive of such a Holocaust-centered Jewish identity. It is considered to be superficial, unsustainable, and even detrimental to the Jewish people as a whole.[37] However, few commentators seem to ask how such a Jewish identity might work in the first place. In this respect, though, it is precisely the Holocaust-inflected writings of such "third generation" Jewish Americans as Chabon, Foer, Krauss, and Englander that offer very illuminating perspectives on how a Holocaust-centered Jewish identity might actually take form. In fact, I suggest that these authors' Holocaust impiety does not bear witness to the

34 As Charles E. Silberman writes, "[i]n the past, Jews remained Jews for one of three basic reasons: because they believed that was what God demanded of them; because they were born into an organic community with powerful sanctions and rewards; or because anti-Semites would not permit them to become anything else. None of these factors can be relied upon today." Charles E. Silberman, *A Certain People: American Jews and Their Lives Today* (New York: Summit, 1985), 159.

35 Seymour M. Lipset and Earl Raab, *Jews and the New American Scene* (Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 1995), 47.

36 Peter Novick, *The Holocaust and Collective Memory: The American Experience* (London: Bloomsbury, 2001), 7.

37 Consider for instance Michael Goldberg, *Why Should Jews Survive: Looking Past the Holocaust Toward a Jewish Future* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

erosion of Jewish identity, but rather to its reinterpretation or even renewal on twenty-first century terms. What is significant here is that even though memory is intricately related to identity, there is no "straight line that runs from memory to identity," as Michael Rothberg suggests; "[o]ur relationship to the past does partially determine who we are in the present, but never straightforwardly and directly."[38] Thus, Chabon, Foer, Krauss, and Englander's literary engagements with the Holocaust bear witness to the fact that this history is indeed a central element of contemporary Jewish American identity. But it is too simplistic to assume that these engagements suggest that the memory of the Holocaust has become all that remains of Jewish American identity, or that they are direct reflections of these authors' traumatized subjectivities.[39] Instead, these authors' engagements with the Holocaust demonstrate that this history functions rather as an important, salient landmark in a highly diverse Jewish America; in their writing, it is precisely as a form of common ground that the memory of the Holocaust *facilitates* ways of engaging with a Jewish cultural and religious heritage much more broadly conceived. At the same time, the sense of impiety that marks these authors' treatment of this history also manifests itself in these literary engagements with Jewishness. That is to say, the imperatives of tradition are often of secondary interest to these authors as they explore and embrace Jewish culture and identity in highly imaginative and flexible ways.

Finally, as Chabon, Foer, Krauss, and Englander impiously seek to find contemporary significance in the history of the Holocaust, and, in so doing, reinvigorate what it means to be Jewish in similarly irreverent ways, they simultaneously demonstrate a commitment to exploring new possibilities of signification. Thus, their work is marked by a new sense of metaphysical optimism that appears strikingly unpostmodern. This is neither the product of an artless naiveté, or, worse, of a reactionary ideology. Instead, I contend that these writers are in fact trying to move *beyond* postmodernism and that their relationship to and portrayals of the Holocaust are central to these attempts. And also in this context, then, these authors may be considered a new generation.[40]

38 Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 4–5.

39 Even if it is assumed that these authors do suffer from a form of intergenerational trauma, it remains an open question to what extent reading their novels as trauma narratives from a psychoanalytical perspective is helpful as *cultural* analysis.

40 Stretching the third generation metaphor even further, one might go as far as to suggest that here, too, these authors represent a third generation as inheritors of both modernism and postmodernism.

Postmodernism, of course, has many meanings: some highly specific, others much more general. In chapter 6 of this study, I address the different meanings and conceptualizations of postmodernism in more detail; for the moment, it is useful to think of postmodernism broadly and inclusively as a diagnostic term for the contemporary condition. On such a view, it is possible to construct, as in fact many critics have done, a connection between postmodernism and the Holocaust. What is crucial here is that the discourse of "no longer possibles" as it emerged in the wake of the Holocaust is to a considerable extent (though certainly not exclusively) a postmodern discourse. "Central to these 'no longer possibles,'" Eric Santner writes, "whether they be modes of aesthetic practice, thinking, political practice, or human interaction, is an inability to tolerate difference, heterogeneity, nonmastery."[41] That is to say, after Auschwitz, it becomes painfully apparent that the core tenets of Western modernity ironically harbor within them, and continually reimpose, mechanisms of bloody intolerance and exclusion. After Auschwitz, then, these core tenets and achievements are no longer possible and acceptable. Still, it is also very difficult to get rid of them—central as they are to Western civilization. And it is precisely to this challenge that postmodernism can be seen to respond, Santner suggests:

> [p]ostmodernism, as I am using the term here, may thus be understood as a collection of theoretical and aesthetic strategies dedicated, some directly, some rather more indirectly, to undoing a certain repetition compulsion of modern European history. This compulsion may be seen to have found its ultimate staging in Auschwitz, which can be seen as a sort of modern industrial apparatus for the elimination of difference. (9)

Postmodernism, then, in Santner's very careful and subtle formulation is not so much a direct response to or product of the Holocaust, as some critics have boldly claimed, but is instead much more tenuously related to this history.[42] Nonetheless, in as far as it is a constellation of discourses on

41 Santner, *Stranded Objects*, 9. Hereafter cited in the text.

42 For instance, in his study *The Holocaust and the Postmodern*, Robert Eaglestone takes it upon himself, among other things, "to show that postmodernism in the West begins with thinking about the Holocaust, that postmodernism—understood as poststructuralism, a still developing tradition of post-phenomenological philosophy—is a response to the Holocaust." Thus, Eaglestone boldly posits a strong, apparently causal relationship between the Holocaust and a somewhat narrow conception of postmodernism. Robert Eaglestone, *The Holocaust and the Postmodern* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 2.

the contemporary, postmodernism for Santner remains significantly and inextricably a discourse about the post-Holocaust. In fact, he suggests that the contemporary itself must be seen as "a cultural space marked off by the double 'post' of the post-Holocaust and the postmodern" (150).

Of course, the contemporary is never fixed in time but marked rather by constant flux. It should come as no surprise, then, that just as the post-Holocaust is subject to change, as I have discussed, so is postmodernism. Indeed, postmodernism has in recent years been subjected to severe criticism from within—that is, from circles formerly sympathetic to it. Essentially, postmodernism is charged with having made impossible such concepts as meaning, reference, ethics, and political agency through its relentless and ultimately irresponsible insistence on "no longer possibles." In the last two decades or so, as Josh Toth and Neil Brooks write, postmodernism's "increasingly loud movement toward silence and/or the absolute denial of objective truth claims became dogmatic, institutionalized and programmatic."[43] However, Toth and Brooks suggest that it is precisely at this moment when postmodernism itself has become hegemonic, "when postmodernism seems to have become the very thing it aimed to destroy[,] that we begin to see signs of an emergent cultural trend, or 'epistemological configuration'" (2). In order to understand this emerging "epistemological configuration," Santner's proposition that the contemporary can be seen as "a cultural space marked off by the double 'post' of the post-Holocaust and the postmodern" may be particularly suggestive—though admittedly in ways that Santner had not originally intended. If there was a tenuous but significant connection between postmodernism and the post-Holocaust, I would suggest that recent developments and changes in Holocaust representation may at the same time shed interesting light on recent efforts to move beyond postmodernism. This is not to say that all contemporary engagements with the Holocaust are automatically "post-postmodern," or that all attempts to transcend the postmodern impasse are motivated by the memory of the Holocaust. It is rather to suggest that Holocaust impiety in particular may offer an especially compelling angle on the question of what it means to move beyond postmodernism. On this view, then, I suggest that the Holocaust impiety of Chabon, Foer, Krauss, and Englander does not only represent a renewal of Holocaust memory and Jewish identity, but also appears to be symptomatic of a broader agenda

43 Josh Toth and Neil Brooks, "Introduction: A Wake and Renewed?" in *The Mourning After: Attending the Wake of Postmodernism*, ed. Neil Brooks and Josh Toth (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2007), 7. Hereafter cited in the text.

aimed at the renewal of the possibilities of (moral) signification in the wake of postmodernism.

One significant indicator in this respect is a variety of comments that these authors have made about their own work and about their views on poetics and aesthetics more generally. The canonical postmodernist writers were often intimately acquainted with Wittgensteinian and poststructuralist theories about language and representation, and openly cultivated a radically deconstructivist sensibility. The present generation shares, enjoys, and sometimes openly celebrates this intellectual baggage, but is at the same time much less eager to deconstruct and more interested in rediscovering and *reconstructing* some form of common ground. Michael Chabon, for instance, even if his novels showcase a variety of characteristically postmodern features, has expressed outright apprehension about postmodern aesthetics. In an essay about the modern short story, he offers a striking commentary on his position:

> I read for entertainment, and I write to entertain. Period. Oh, I could decoct a brew of other, more impressive motivations and explanations. I could uncork some stuff about reader response theory, or the Lacanian *parole*. I could go on about the storytelling impulse and the need to make sense of experience through story. A spritz of Jung might scent the air. I could adduce Kafka's formula: "A book must be an ice-axe to break the seas frozen inside our soul." I could go down to the café at the local mega-bookstore and take some wise words of Abelard or Koestler about the power of literature off a mug. But in the end—here's my point—it would still all boil down to *entertainment*, and its suave henchman, pleasure.[44]

Chabon, I would suggest, is not simply trumpeting an anti-intellectual or populist aesthetic. He is arguing, rather, for what might be considered a "neo-humanist" renewal of certain—communicative and moral—dimensions of literature that postmodernism in particular has (or is perceived to have) neglected. Thus, for Chabon, "entertainment" does not signify pleasure pure and simple, but a much more profound moral sentiment motivated by a desire to establish a sense of inter-human or inter-subjective communication and connection. Indeed, he suggests that "entertainment—as I define it, pleasure and all—remains the only sure means we have of bridging, or at least of feeling as if we have bridged, the gulf of consciousness

44 Michael Chabon, "Trickster in a Suit of Lights: Thoughts on the Modern Short Story," in *Maps and Legends: Reading and Writing Along the Borderlands* (San Francisco: McSweeney's, 2008), 14. Italics in original.

that separates each of us from everybody else."[45] Significantly, this humanistic sentiment that highlights the forging of inter-human bonds through (pleasurable) engagements with literature is often expressed in various ways by Krauss, Foer, and Englander as well.[46] In these authors' fiction, moreover, these kinds of hopeful positions are not only no longer quite postmodern; often they are proposed more or less directly in the face of, and in defiance of, the bleakness and hopelessness that the memory of the Holocaust seems to inspire.

From the altered faces of Holocaust memory to the changing Jewish American situation and the recent developments in postmodernism: all of these different, highly fluid, yet interrelated contexts are important and need to be considered when studying the recent Holocaust-inflected fiction of Michael Chabon, Jonathan Safran Foer, Nicole Krauss, and Nathan Englander. Indeed, it is precisely from such a multifocal perspective that one can begin to make sense of the complex implications and significations of a statement like Chabon's: "in *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* I tried to use my imagination to undo at least some of the effects of the Holocaust, and to imagine a way out of the catastrophe."[47] Yet this broad and inclusive contextualization has a further consequence: though this work is in the first and final analysis a study of literature, it operates on a very broad understanding of literary studies as one form of *cultural* studies. That is to say, even if it is my main aim to offer a critical understanding of a particular body of Jewish American literature about the Holocaust, this objective can only be realized through a much broader critical understanding of contemporary Holocaust memory and the American context, the contemporary Jewish American experience, and postmodernism. Consequently, this study is divided into three parts: the first devoted to memory, the second to identity, and the third to the emerging trend of moving beyond postmodernism. Each part contains one or two chapters with a fairly general focus on matters of theory as well as cultural and intellectual history. These chapters precede—and are intended to pave the ground for—chapters with a more narrow focus on the literature.

45 Ibid., 17.
46 Some of these comments are presented in chapter 7 of this study.
47 Chabon, interview by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

PART I

MEMORY

1

Mapping Holocaust Thought

From Exceptionalism to the Normalization of Holocaust Discourse

More than any other historical topic, the Holocaust invites commentary, criticism, reflection, and controversy. It does so in artistic and popular media, as well as in theology and academia. And as commentary begets commentary, there is now—in addition to the many archives and libraries of primary material—an ever-expanding body of Holocaust-related scholarship, criticism, and thought. This discourse ranges from very practical, hands-on issues (for instance, issues of chronology: what happened, when, where, involving whom) to much more ethereal, philosophical and existential, (self-)reflexive ones. At both ends of the spectrum, though, reflection on the Holocaust (or reflection on reflection on the Holocaust) is profoundly invested with significance and urgency. Saul Friedlander, for instance, writes in his introduction to the seminal essay collection *Probing the Limits of Representation*, that the Holocaust is "an event which tests our traditional conceptual and representational categories, an event 'at the limits.'"[1] Indeed, the Holocaust and the diverse issues it provokes cut to the core of contemporary thought and morality. And this has even led the sociologist Jeffrey Alexander to go as far as to suggest that the "Holocaust has become the central myth of our time, the epochal legend that forges the ultimate standard of good and evil."[2]

1 Saul Friedlander, "Introduction," in *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the Final Solution*, ed. Saul Friedlander (Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 1992), 3. Somewhat further down the same page, Friedlander continues by saying that "there are limits to representation *which should not but can easily be transgressed*" (italics in original).

2 Jeffrey C. Alexander, "On the Global and Local Representations of the Holocaust Tragedy," in *Remembering the Holocaust: A Debate*, by Jeffrey C. Alexander et al. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 174.

The Holocaust may represent our culture and period's central myth, but clearly the exact nature or meaning of this myth has never been formulated definitively. What can be said about the Holocaust today could not be said yesterday, and what was said yesterday appears strange or antiquated today. This has important repercussions for understanding contemporary Holocaust fiction, because it forces the reader to consider questions concerning the present state of Holocaust memory and thought. In fact, as will be seen further in this study, much contemporary Holocaust writing often engages quite explicitly with established or mainstream ways of thinking about this history. Consequently, then, one can no longer—if one ever could—read Holocaust literature "naively," without taking into account this tremendous presence of existing Holocaust commentary and thought.[3] Yet a simple review or synopsis of the intellectual content that underlies the surface of contemporary Holocaust writing will not suffice in understanding, for instance, the Holocaust-inflected writings of Jewish American authors like Chabon, Foer, Krauss, and Englander. The difficulty is, precisely, that the relation between Holocaust thought and literature is never simple or straightforward. In this respect, Sue Vice interestingly observes that "Holocaust fictions are scandalous: that is, they invariably provoke controversy by inspiring revulsion and acclaim in equal measure."[4] And the very reason that they do so is because the Holocaust itself is a topic of public and intellectual debate that, for perfectly good reason, never fails to raise strong emotions, heated controversy, and indeed scandal. And for that reason, a critical understanding of contemporary Holocaust literature can only be reached by moving slowly through highly contested intellectual territory.

Indeed, upon entering this territory, what will quickly become clear is that the Holocaust has meant very different things to different people, and that these different meanings, moreover, were never stable but subject to considerable change over time. As a result, some profound and perplexing paradoxes have taken hold of Holocaust memory and thought in the last few decades. On the one hand, the Holocaust figures as one of the constitutive traumas of our time, one of the contemporary West's founding myths, and one of the very few remaining widely shared articles of faith in our culture. In fact, the Holocaust in contemporary Western culture tends

3 Though one can consider Holocaust commentary very broadly in terms of everything that has been said, written, and made in response to the Holocaust, I will limit myself in this chapter to speaking of "Holocaust thought," by which I mean critical reflections on the Holocaust.

4 Sue Vice, *Holocaust Fiction* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 1.

to be surrounded by an aura of sanctity, and discourse about it seems to demand a certain measure of solemnity: few things make all of us as angry as Holocaust denial either by fringe "historians" or mad Middle Eastern dictators. Yet the apparent sanctity of the subject seems to be in tension with the fact that the significance and importance of the Holocaust is most pervasively and relentlessly "proselytized" by mainstream and commercial media which disseminate it in highly mediated and commercialized ways.[5] As a result, the memory the Holocaust has by now become deeply intertwined with popular culture and identity politics. And for that reason, critics deplore the ways in which it is vulgarized, trivialized, universalized, normalized, de-sanctified, Americanized, and commodified.

In fact, one might go so far as to claim that the Holocaust evidently remains an important memory, but that this relevance seems to be borne out most strongly by types of representations that are charged with diminishing the importance of the Holocaust. This rather complicates critical thinking about the Holocaust today. Influential statements and theories that claimed that the Holocaust was essentially unspeakable and unfathomable no longer seem quite as compelling in the face of a contemporary Holocaust-saturated media landscape in which consumers' hunger for information and almost-real experience is instantly fulfilled. Yet sweeping attacks on the "Holocaust industry," which have sought to scandalize practically the whole of contemporary Holocaust discourse, offer few constructive ways of thinking about the Holocaust.[6]

Clearly, there has appeared a gap between those who defend the Holocaust's essential unspeakability and the actuality of contemporary popular memory culture, which is dominated by representations that target mass-audiences. At least in part, this gap may be explained from the perspective of common sense: if time heals all wounds, surely the passing of almost seventy years has mellowed to some extent even the wounds of the Holocaust, if only for the reason that most people living today were born after World War II. And also because of the fact that we have become

5 Consider, for instance, Jeffrey Shandler, *While America Watches: Televising the Holocaust* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999). Shandler's book studies the ways in which the Holocaust has been presented on American television, "the most obvious and ubiquitous form of Holocaust memory culture in America" (xv). Shandler also notes that "in America this subject has almost always been mediated through newspapers, magazines, books, theaters, exhibition galleries, concert halls, or radio and television broadcasting" (xv).

6 A well-known example of such an attack would be Norman G. Finkelstein, *The Holocaust Industry: Reflections on the Exploitation of Jewish Suffering* (London and New York: Verso, 2000).

"used" to stories about the Holocaust, it may not be so surprising that the Holocaust no longer strikes the public with speechlessness. In his sociological theory of cultural trauma, Jeffrey Alexander explains that after a historical trauma has thoroughly unsettled a collective identity, "there will eventually emerge a period of 'calming down.' The spiral of signification flattens out, affect and emotion become less inflamed, preoccupation with sacrality and pollution fades. Charisma becomes routinized, effervescence evaporates, and liminality gives way to reaggregation."[7] Alexander argues that this process is not only inevitable, but even desirable in the long run. The creation and routinization of cultural traumas allow "members of wider publics to participate in the pain of others," and in such a way, they "broaden the realm of social understanding and sympathy."[8]

Sympathetic though I feel to Alexander's analyses, they offer little or no insight into how such processes of routinization and calming down affect actual discourses about the Holocaust in terms of content and meaning, nor do they offer the tools for understanding these discourses. Yet from a humanities or cultural studies perspective, these are the areas where the most important questions arise: what is this routinization of the Holocaust and is it alright? What kind of understandings of the Holocaust does it produce and are these acceptable? Does it lead to what John Roth calls "good memory" or something less desirable, perhaps even bad memory?[9] And more specifically, how does it offer us ways of understanding contemporary representation of the Holocaust in popular culture, from so-

7 Jeffrey C. Alexander, "Toward a Theory of Cultural Trauma," in *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*, by Jeffrey C. Alexander et al. (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 2004), 22. In this volume, Alexander et al. present a sociological and radically constructivist approach to trauma that should not be confused with the more psychoanalytically-inclined trauma theory discussed in the introduction. In fact, the authors have strong reservations about such a psychoanalytical approach.

8 Ibid., 24.

9 Roth writes:

> Good memory depends on vivid recollection and on lucid connection; it requires recalling details with candor, documenting what is recalled, and discerning patterns of action with honesty. But good memory goes beyond those essential qualities too. It involves questions not only about what we remember but also about how we remember, what we do with what we remember, whether we turn memory into something that hurts or something that heals.

John K. Roth, *Holocaust Politics* (Louisville, London, and Leiden: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 135.

called serious literature to mass-produced novels and films? My concern, therefore, is in investigating how Alexander's notion of the routinization of cultural trauma can be made operational beyond sociology in the sense of leading to a viable Holocaust thought and criticism that has both academic and moral integrity. To that purpose, I want to trace a number of influential though conflicting strands in thinking about the Holocaust that have been dominant since the 1940s. I will identify a development in Holocaust thought that has set in roughly since the 1990s whereby a highly "inflamed" sensibility gradually makes room for a more calmed-down, normalized, self-reflexive perspective and argue that such a development is vital in order to fruitfully understand contemporary Holocaust discourses.

"Holocaust Piety": The Exceptionalist Perspective

In the second decade of the twenty-first century, Holocaust studies and thought constitute an immense field of inquiry with roots going back to the 1940s. It is no longer possible to give a comprehensive overview of this vast body of work. For that reason, contemporary scholars now regularly attempt to chart the more than six decades of Holocaust scholarship and memory by heuristically introducing binary oppositions. Michael Rothberg, for instance, distinguishes between "realists" and "antirealists." The realist approach entails "both an epistemological claim that the Holocaust is knowable and a representational claim that this knowledge can be translated into a familiar mimetic universe." The antirealist approach, by contrast, starts from the position "that the Holocaust is not knowable or would be knowable only under radically new regimes of knowledge and that it cannot be captured in traditional representational schemata." According to Rothberg, the realist approach generally informs scholarly approaches to the Holocaust, especially those of historians, while the "antirealist approach has flourished in more popular discourses, in some survivor testimony and pronouncements, and in many literary, aesthetic, and philosophical considerations of the 'uniqueness' of the Shoah."[10]

Though one must appreciate the effort to bring some order to the great variety of approaches to the Holocaust, on closer inspection, Rothberg's opposition between realists and antirealists is too sweeping and limiting, and the order it appears to create is highly deceptive. Rothberg's suggestion that antirealist approaches inform popular discourses is patently

10 Michael Rothberg, *Traumatic Realism: The Demands of Holocaust Representation* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 3–4.

false. What characterizes contemporary popular discourses about the Holocaust—Hollywood movies, popular novels and memoirs, high-tech experiential museums—is precisely their uncannily immersive realism. And to find in historiography a tendency toward realism may be excusable, yet it fails to do justice to the enormous linguistic or "tropological," and ethical sensibilities of some of the Holocaust's foremost historians like Raul Hilberg and Saul Friedlander. According to Michael Dintenfass, these historians call "the adequacy, indeed the very possibility, of [the Holocaust's] reconstruction into question. … Neither Hilberg nor Friedlander retains any hope that Auschwitz will admit of historical understanding. Both turn in the face of its unknowability to the aesthetic."[11] The now highly popular and influential field of memory studies, which generally subscribes to a constructivist epistemological basis, does not fit well on either side of the realist/antirealist dichotomy.

It seems to me that there is no single binary opposition that can wholly and comprehensively chart the whole of Holocaust thought. And yet, as long as they are used carefully and not too sweepingly, these binaries have an unmistakable heuristic merit. Hence, I will suggest that established, mainstream popular and intellectual discourse about the meaning of the Holocaust in (Western) history and culture can best be understood by focusing—heuristically—on two distinct and more or less opposing schools of thought. Thus, on the one hand there are those earlier approaches which have tended to invest the Holocaust with something of a mystical nature demanding reverence. More recent approaches, on the other hand, have "irreverently" begun to challenge not the enormity of the Holocaust per se, but precisely the mysticism in which it is often shrouded. This particular opposition, as I cannot emphasize enough, charts and characterizes only a delineated though highly significant part of Holocaust thought, not its entirety. It does, however, comprise the main intellectual context or force field in which the recent Jewish American literature this study is devoted to is situated. Arguably, the most prominent voices that have shaped this context of established Holocaust thought have been survivors, novelists, critics, and philosophers, rather than, say, historians or theologians, whose work tends to have more specialist or denominational appeal.[12] For that reason, in outlining the main

11 Michael Dintenfass, "Truth's Other: Ethics, the History of the Holocaust, and Historiographical Theory After the Linguistic Turn," *History and Theory* 39, no. 1 (2000): 18, doi: 10.1111/0018-2656.00110.

12 This is not to deny that historians like Saul Friedlander or Raul Hilberg, or theologians like Richard Rubenstein and Emil Fackenheim have made highly significant contributions to Holocaust thought. However, on the whole, key debates in Ho-

tenets of this intellectual context I will be drawing mostly from (literary) criticism and philosophy, rather than from historiography and theology.

In the US, the Holocaust achieved the position as "central myth of our time" only as late as the 1970s, as many critics have demonstrated. In fact, Jeffrey Alexander has described at some length that before that time, the events of the Holocaust were represented in popular culture in an optimistic and self-confident American framework that he calls the "progressive narrative."[13] In this progressive narrative, the Holocaust figured at the margins of a coherent historical story of struggle against evil and of ultimate American victory. Dachau, Bergen-Belsen, and Buchenwald (Auschwitz was not often mentioned) appeared in a larger story about World War II where they constituted the most extreme proof of Nazi evil, which had by now fortunately been conquered and overcome. For a number of reasons, the progressive narrative gradually lost its force during the mid-sixties and seventies. The "Jewish mass killings" no longer constituted a single chapter in the larger history of World War II, but they were now singled out as events important by themselves; it was in this period that the Jewish mass killings came to be widely known as "the Holocaust."[14] During the seventies, the Holocaust became accepted as a legitimate field of academic study and was even established institutionally as an academic discipline. The first critical monograph on Holocaust literature, Lawrence Langer's *The Holocaust and the Literary Imagination*, appeared in 1975, and a year later Franklin H. Littell established the first doctoral program in Holocaust Studies at Temple University. Tellingly, Raul Hilberg had experienced considerable trouble getting his monumental history *The Destruction of the European Jews* published a decade earlier.[15]

In this new constellation, the Holocaust was remembered through what Alexander calls a "tragic narrative," in which these historic events

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locaust historiography (such as between the intentionalists and functionalists) and in post-Holocaust theology (on covenantal questions, for instance, or the issue of theodicy) are of concern mostly to specialists. By contrast, those perennial questions of Holocaust thought—about its consequences for Western culture and modernity, or the question of whether it can be represented in language or in art—have most persistently and influentially (though not exclusively) been addressed by survivors, writers, philosophers and literary critics.

13 Jeffrey C. Alexander, "The Social Construction of Moral Universals," in Alexander, *Remembering the Holocaust*, 15–27.

14 Ibid., 30–31.

15 Raul Hilberg, *The Politics of Memory: The Journey of a Holocaust Historian* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1996), 105–119.

were invested with extraordinary significance. The Holocaust "became what we might identify, in Durkheimian terms, as a sacred-evil, an evil that recalled a trauma of such enormity and horror that it had to be radically set apart from the world and all of its other traumatizing events. It became inexplicable in ordinary rational terms."[16] This interpretation of the Holocaust as something beyond existing categories profoundly influenced (scholarly) thinking about the Holocaust and it characteristically led to an insistent emphasis on the fundamental inadequacy of language to convey the full truth of the Holocaust, its incomprehensible horror. For instance, in the preface to *The Holocaust and the Literary Imagination*, Lawrence Langer claims that the "existence of Dachau and Auschwitz as historical phenomena has altered not only our conception of reality, but its very nature" and continues by suggesting that the "challenge to the literary imagination is to find a way of making this fundamental truth accessible to the mind and emotions of the reader."[17] Such views were especially widespread among literary scholars—though much less so among historians—and thus took hold an influential strand or paradigm of Holocaust thought that Alan Mintz calls the "exceptionalist model" and which continues to resonate in public consciousness today (though it seems to be on the wane in academia).[18] The exceptionalist model has a number of forceful advantages, as well as some considerable disadvantages, both of which I would like to subject to scrutiny, after briefly discussing some of the origins of this perspective. After all, scholars like Langer, who championed this exceptionalist approach in academia, did not conjure it out of thin air, but were able to cite some very powerful authorities.

In the first place, there were the survivors themselves. It is an oft-recurring characteristic of survivor testimony to note the incomprehensibility of the camps and to stress the inadequacy of language to do justice to the reality of the camps. Without any doubt, Elie Wiesel is the principal spokesperson of this perspective, having again and again reiterated varia-

16 Alexander, "The Social Construction of Moral Universals," 28, 29.

17 Lawrence L. Langer, *The Holocaust and the Literary Imagination* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1975), xii.

18 Alan Mintz, *Popular Culture and the Shaping of Holocaust Memory in America* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2001), 38. As regards the waning popularity of the exceptionalist model in academia, Alvin H. Rosenfeld's recent *The End of the Holocaust* could in fact be read as an exceptionalist "last stand" in the face of an overwhelming popularization (etcetera) of the Holocaust through mass media. Alvin H. Rosenfeld, *The End of the Holocaust* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2011).

tions of it for around fifty years now.[19] In "A Plea for the Survivors" (1975), Wiesel reflects on a double bind in which survivors find themselves: they have a duty to bear witness, but "how is one to say, how is one to communicate that which by its nature defies language? How is one to tell without betraying the dead, without betraying oneself?"[20] From this deeply vexed position, Wiesel distances himself sharply from Holocaust literature. For him, "there is no such thing as Holocaust literature—there cannot be. Auschwitz negates all literature as it negates all theories and doctrines" (234). Popular Holocaust novels and films "cheapen" the event and empty it of substance (238). Indeed, reading or viewing them, "one might think that the Holocaust was a terrible but beautiful story" (240). Literature and film would undermine the truth about the Holocaust by creating illusions among the audience of knowing what it was like. However, "[w]hoever has not lived through the event can never know it. And whoever has lived through it can never fully reveal it. The survivor speaks in an alien tongue. You will never break its code. … A novel about Auschwitz is not a novel, or it is not about Auschwitz. One cannot imagine Treblinka, just as one cannot reinvent Ponar" (234).

By the time Wiesel wrote these words, in the mid-seventies, he was already very much an established public figure. Before that period, he and other survivors had said similar things. Yet in the years immediately after the war, the voices of the survivors were not yet as clearly heard as they would be in later years. In this period, none would more influential in dispersing an exceptionalist perspective on the Holocaust as the Frankfurt School critic Theodor W. Adorno. In the final paragraph of his essay "Cultural Criticism and Society" (written 1949, published 1951), Adorno wrote: "[t]o write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric. And this corrodes even the knowledge of why it has become impossible to write poetry today."[21] Today, hardly a study of Holocaust literature passes without giving credit to those words, and even noting their "oft-quoted" as well as their "often misunderstood" nature has become something of a cliché

19 Steven Schwarzschild has referred to Wiesel as "the defacto high priest of our generation, the one who speaks most tellingly in our time of our hopes and fears, our tragedy and our protest." Quoted in Michael Berenbaum, *After Tragedy and Triumph: Modern Jewish Thought and the American Experience* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 19.

20 Elie Wiesel, "A Plea for the Surivors," in *A Jew Today* (New York: Vintage, 1979), 235. Hereafter cited in the text.

21 Theodor W. Adorno, "Cultural Criticism and Society," in *Can One Live After Auschwitz: A Philosophical Reader*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 162.

in this field of scholarship—hereby duly employed. Yet the fact remains that what has come to be known in Holocaust studies as the "Adorno dictum" has been enormously influential, and has come to live a life of its own. Misinterpreted or not, it was enthusiastically embraced by many subsequent commentators in order to help express the feeling that after the Holocaust, "after Auschwitz" (which itself became a slogan), "something" had irrevocably changed. Indeed, it was felt that the Holocaust marked a rupture, a rift in Western culture, a breakdown in Western civilization. In the shadow of the horrors of the Holocaust, it had become impossible to continue in the old, familiar ways. Literature and art, in their striving for aesthetic beauty, had become not merely suspect, but unethical, "barbaric."

Another important early representative of the exceptionalist perspective is the critic and novelist George Steiner, who, in *Language and Silence*, a collection of essays written in the late fifties and sixties, reflected intensely on the status of language and literature after the horrors of World War II and the Holocaust. One of Steiner's key points in this collection is that language and literature, and by extension, the great humanist tradition they gave birth to, cannot and do not rise from the ruins of the first half of the twentieth century unscathed. Steiner is particularly sensitive to the realities of Auschwitz, and in his diverse ruminations he often devotes special attention to the Holocaust. In "A Kind of Survivor: For Elie Wiesel," Steiner explains that, as a Jew who emigrated from France to the US in 1940, the Holocaust is "indivisible from my own identity," and he feels that he is in fact "a kind of survivor."[22] For Steiner, the Holocaust, more than any other of the extremely violent events of the twentieth century, changes everything and becomes the benchmark event of the age.

Yet in Steiner's writing, this idea is a point of departure, rather than a point to be argued. His comments on the Holocaust, therefore, do not really constitute an extended philosophical engagement, but rather a collection of scattered remarks and observations. For example, in his essay "K," Steiner discusses the work of Kafka and relates Kafka's prophetic vision of "the coming of the age of the inhuman" to a paradoxical poetics surrounding the impossibility of writing and literature. By way of illustration, Steiner interrupts his analysis by saying that "[t]he world of Auschwitz lies outside speech as it lies outside reason."[23] This claim is not further substan-

22 George Steiner, *Language and Silence: Essays on Language, Literature, and the Inhuman* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998), 140, 145.

23 Ibid., 123.

tiated. And in "Postscript," Steiner turns his attention more specifically to (writing about) the Holocaust. In the course of the essay, he makes the point that what happened in the concentration camps is "wholly unforgivable": those who were not there should not speak in terms of hate or forgiveness, because that would amount to only games. Instead, "[t]he best *now*, after so much has been set forth, is, perhaps, to be silent; not to add the trivia of literary, sociological debate, to the unspeakable. So argues Elie Wiesel, so argued a number of witnesses at the Eichmann trial," concludes Steiner.[24] And thus, Steiner promotes the view, seemingly inspired by Adorno, that the Holocaust is a sort of ultimate event that is both all-important as well as all-consuming, a kind of moral and epistemological black hole.[25] As such, it defies ordinary understanding and makes it impossible, obscene, or even unethical, to simply speak or write about the Holocaust.[26]

As critical notions, these ideas and views, cautiously explored in the 1950s and 1960s by figures like Adorno and Steiner, featured in discussions and scholarship that were not principally or exclusively about the Holocaust. (Even Richard L. Rubenstein's *After Auschwitz: Radical Theology and Contemporary Judaism* [1966] is, as the title suggests, principally concerned with Judaism *after* the Holocaust, rather than a work of Holocaust scholarship per se). Yet they formed an important basis to a more outspokenly Holocaust-centered criticism that developed since the 1970s in the work of, mostly, literary critics like Lawrence Langer, Alvin Rosenfeld, and Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi.[27] Langer, for instance, explicitly

24 Ibid., 163. And yet, Steiner immediately adds: "The next best is, I believe, to try and understand, to keep faith with what may well be the utopian commitment to reason and historical analysis of a man like Kaplan [Chaim Aron Kaplan, an important Warsaw Ghetto diarist, JK]."

25 Though Steiner never engages directly with the Adorno dictum (he casually refers to it in *Language and Silence* only once), Michael Rothberg assures us that "Adorno's claim has produced sustained reflection by Steiner on the status of poetry and language 'after Auschwitz,'" and that the essays in *Language and Silence* are "premised on the Adornian proposition." Rothberg, *Traumatic Realism*, 30–31.

26 In "Postscript," Steiner even suggests that it might be "proper" that Jean-François Steiner's study *Treblinka* was received with ugly recriminations, "[f]or it is by no means certain that rational discourse *can* cope with these questions, lying as they do outside the normative syntax of human communication, in the explicit domain of the bestial; nor is it clear that those who were not themselves fully involved should touch on these agonies unscathed." Steiner, *Language and Silence*, 164.

27 Langer, *The Holocaust and the Literary Imagination*; Alvin H. Rosenfeld, *A Double Dying: Reflections on Holocaust Literature* (Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press, 1980); Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi, *By Words Alone: The Holocaust in Literature* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

sets himself the task to "explore ways in which the writer has devised an idiom and a style for the unspeakable, and particularly the unspeakable horrors at the heart of the Holocaust experience." And Rosenfeld takes as his point of departure the observation that "Holocaust literature occupies another sphere of study, one that … extends so far as to force us to contemplate what may be fundamental changes in our modes of perception and expression, our altered way of being-in-the-world."[28] Weighty and solemn words, yet it is precisely in the sheer magnitude of the challenge these critics' confront themselves with that the exceptionalist perspective's strength and appeal lies.

What emerges from the writings of a survivor like Wiesel and critics like Steiner, Langer, and Rosenfeld is an intensely felt ethical commitment and an overwhelming sense of responsibility toward the dead. It answers to a broadly felt intuition among Holocaust survivors, artists, and—especially since the 1970s—scholars that in Auschwitz something of another order came to pass that cannot be and *should not* be comprehended within any existing categories of knowledge or experience. That view has shaped the dimensions of Holocaust memory ever since, arguably in no small part because it was augmented from the 1970s onward by a scholarly approach, which lent it depth and complexity, not to mention legitimacy. Indeed, the so-called "limits of representation" emerged in this period as the most significant recurrent theme in much Holocaust-related scholarship and criticism, as is attested for instance by the aforementioned and highly influential volume *Probing the Limits of Representation*, edited by Saul Friedlander.[29] It is important to highlight in this context that the exceptionalist position had and still has, as Alan Mintz puts it, a "great prophetic appeal." At the same time, and after the decades in which the progressive narrative of the Holocaust held sway, this prophetic appeal coincides naturally with "a perceptible need to arouse readers to the enormity of the horror."[30] And so, the exceptionalist perspective works on two levels. On the one hand, it seeks to attend to (rather than to fully understand) the Holocaust in ways that are not totalizing, reductive, and naïve,

28 Langer, *The Holocaust and the Literary Imagination*, xii; Rosenfeld, *A Double Dying*, 12–13.

29 What is interesting, however, about this preoccupation with the "limits of representation" in much Holocaust thought is, as Ruth Franklin points out, that "the possibility that there might *not* be limits on representation is not considered." Ruth Franklin, *A Thousand Darknesses: Lies and Truth in Holocaust Fiction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 6.

30 Mintz, *Popular Culture*, 41.

but which somehow provide a sense of scope or perspective to the "ultimate mystery" that it considers the Holocaust to be. On the other hand, its products—scholarly and non-scholarly—function in decidedly moral ways as memorials to the dead and lessons or interpellations to the living.

Beyond the testimony of survivors, the (moral) force of the exceptionalist perspective on the Holocaust is perhaps most urgently felt in French poststructuralist philosophy after the so-called ethical turn (which occurred, roughly, in the course of the 1980s).[31] In particular Jean-François Lyotard and Jacques Derrida, two of the most important representatives of this school of thought, have displayed an intense and profound awareness of the Holocaust, which, in line with the exceptionalist perspective, they have regarded as an ultimate manifestation of an unspeakable and unfathomable alterity.[32]

Jean-François Lyotard addresses the issue of the Holocaust most explicitly in his texts *The Differend* and *Heidegger and "the jews."* In the latter work, he is concerned with a sense of "forgetting" that lurks at the core of all forms of thought, rendering it inherently inadequate. Lyotard argues that Western thought, in order to create a (totalitarian) closed unity, has always tried to deny and repress this sense of forgetting and inadequacy; yet this effort to forget what is forgotten is ultimately impossible. In fact, Lyotard uses the phrase "the jews" as a metaphor to refer to the various ways in which the repressed has always returned to Western consciousness, making its own inadequacy felt again. For Lyotard, this is precisely where the great philosophical significance of the Holocaust manifests itself. As he puts it, "the final solution consists in exterminating this feeling and along with it the secret of thought, even of occidental thought. Its other

31 Beverly R. Voloshin, "The Ethical Turn in French Postmodern Philosophy," *Pacific Coast Philology* 33, no. 1 (1998): 69–86, doi: 10.2307/1316834. Especially in recent years, moreover, postmodernism is often closely related to the Holocaust. See Robert Eaglestone, *The Holocaust and the Postmodern* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); Paul Crosthwaite, *Trauma, Postmodernism and the Aftermath of World War II* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); Alan Milchman and Alan Rosenberg, eds., *Postmodernism and the Holocaust* (Amsterdam and Atlanta: Rodopi, 1998).

32 Certainly, Lyotard and Derrida are not the only French (post-)structuralist thinkers to have been seriously affected in their work by the Holocaust. Emmanuel Levinas is one of the first to spring to mind, as well as Michel Foucault. On the influence of the Holocaust on both writers respectively see: Helmut Peukert, "Unconditional Responsibility for the Other: The Holocaust and the Thinking of Emmanuel Levinas," in Milchman and Rosenberg, *Postmodernism and the Holocaust*, 155–165; Alan Milchman and Alan Rosenberg, "Michel Foucault, Auschwitz, and the Destruction of the Body," in Milchman and Rosenberg, *Postmodernism and the Holocaust*, 205–237.

side. It destroys the other side of thought."[33] That is to say, the Holocaust represents the ultimate and violent attempt to eradicate once and for all not only the Jews in a physical sense, but also what they metaphorically represent to Western consciousness: a discomforting sense or awareness of its own limits and inadequacy.

Because the Holocaust to Lyotard represents an attempt to "[destroy] the other side of thought" itself, he argues that this history cannot and should not be seen as an "ordinary" historical or political process, but as something extra-ordinary, indeed exceptional (25). Referring to the Nazis' persistence in implementing the Final Solution in the face of extreme military problems, he points out that in the case of the Holocaust, "we are dealing with something else, with the Other" (25). The Holocaust is the deliberate attempt to destroy alterity itself by quite literally destroying "the jews" as the (biblical) neighbor, and, in a more metaphorical sense, by destroying that which represents the very opposite of the Nazi ideological frameworks of meaning—i.e. Judaism or monotheism, humanism, ethics. This attempt to destroy alterity itself may represent a logical impossibility. Still, the notion that this radical form of forgetting, according to Lyotard, was the deliberate aim of the destruction creates an enormous challenge for remembering the Holocaust in the present, as the very nature and aim of the crimes exceed precisely our categories of understanding. Consequently, "it cannot be represented without being missed, being forgotten anew, since it defies images and words" (26). Indeed, to represent the Holocaust would be precisely to forget its unspeakable nature. And it is this maddening paradox of representation that is the central theme and point of departure in *The Differend*, which is often referred to as Lyotard's most important work.

After the destruction and in the postwar era, the Holocaust, Lyotard suggests, constitutes a *differend*, or the "unstable state and instant of language wherein something which must be able to be put into phrases cannot yet be."[34] The Holocaust now represents a "wrong" which cannot be adequately phrased in language, because as soon as this is attempted, the limitless "wrong" turns into a "damage" that may or may not be repaired (5).[35] However, what is important to Lyotard here is that the survivor's

33 Jean-François Lyotard, *Heidegger and "the jews"* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1990), 27. Hereafter cited in text.

34 Jean-François Lyotard, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 13. Hereafter cited in text.

35 For Lyotard, a damage is something that can be quantified, named, and, in principle, repaired. A wrong, by contrast, is "a damage … accompanied by the loss of

inability to speak and the silence that may thus result from the Holocaust does not mean, as Holocaust negationists claim, that the Holocaust does not exist. Silence does not mean non-existence, nor does it lead to forgetting; instead, as Lyotard points out, it leaves a feeling. And this, in turn, suggests that the Other has not been successfully destroyed: its attempted eradication remains as a lingering feeling that cannot be articulated. In an oft-quoted passage, Lyotard explains his point:

> Suppose that an earthquake destroys not only lives, buildings, and objects but also the instruments used to measure earthquakes directly and indirectly. The impossibility of quantitatively measuring it does not prohibit, but rather inspires in the minds of the survivors the idea of a very great seismic force. The scholar claims to know nothing about it, but the common person has a complex feeling, the one aroused by the negative presentation of the indeterminate. *Mutatis mutandis*, the silence that the crime of Auschwitz imposes upon the historian is a sign for the common person. (56)

To Lyotard, Auschwitz is something of such singular dimensions that it cannot be uttered and put in ordinary language. Therefore, when attempts are made to do so in spite of this impossibility, the feeling that Lyotard refers to is irrevocably lost. And this, Lyotard suggests, may be one explanation of why so many survivors have kept their silence and why so many of them have felt "[s]hame and anger over the explanations and interpretations—as sophisticated as they may be—by thinkers who claim to have found some sense to this shit [*sic*]" (98).

Lyotard's is one of the most intricate and intriguing formulations of an exceptionalist perspective on the Holocaust, and, consequently, he is one of the persons Gillian Rose singles out in her critique of what she terms "Holocaust piety."[36] Yet his thought does not automatically lead to a ban on any discourse about the Holocaust—as it also does not, incidentally, for Lawrence Langer, Alvin Rosenfeld, or even Elie Wiesel.[37] If

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the means to prove the damage" (5), and therefore exists exterior to the categories of language and knowledge. Because a wrong can exist only outside of language and reason, it is logically impossible to bear witness to. Should one attempt to do so, one would face the accusation that "either the damages you complain about never took place, and your testimony is false; or else, they took place and since you are able to testify to them, it is not a wrong that has been done to you, but merely a damage, and your testimony is still false" (5).

36 Gillian Rose, *Mourning Becomes the Law: Philosophy and Representation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 43.

37 Langer writes that "[t]he fundamental task of the critic is not to ask whether [writing Holocaust literature] should or can be done, since it already has been, but to

the Holocaust constitutes a differend, Lyotard argues, it is precisely that differend that must be borne witness to "by finding idioms for [it]" (13). What must be put into phrases is not so much the event itself, but the very impossibility to put the event into phrases. In *Heidegger and "the jews,"* Lyotard writes: "[o]ne must, certainly, inscribe in words, in images. One cannot escape the necessity of representing. … But it is one thing to do it in view of saving the memory, and quite another to try to preserve the remainder, the unforgettable forgotten, in writing" (26). It is in fact precisely in art and in literature that this unforgettable forgotten may be preserved: "[w]hat art can do is bear witness not to the sublime, but to this aporia of art and to its pain. It does not say the unsayable, but says that it cannot say it" (47).

Similar thoughts occur in the work of Jacques Derrida, primarily in his essays *Cinders* and "Shibboleth: For Paul Celan." In the former, Derrida evokes the Holocaust through the concept of the cinder, which signifies something so fragile that it falls apart as soon as it is touched, "something that erases itself totally, radically, while presenting itself."[38] The cinder is "what remains without remaining from the holocaust, from the all-burning, from the incineration the incense [*sic*]."[39] By speaking of cinders, then, Derrida is able to speak of the Holocaust without having to speak of the Holocaust. Or more precisely, by speaking in terms of absence rather than presence, he attempts to speak *of* the unspeakable without speaking the unspeakable itself.[40]

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evaluate *how* it has been done." Langer, *The Holocaust and the Literary Imagination*, 22. Rosenfeld suggests that "Holocaust literature, with all its acknowledged difficulties and imperfections, can be seen as occupying not only a legitimate place in modern letters but a central place." Rosenfeld, *A Double Dying*, 27. And Wiesel asks that "no one misunderstand me: in no way do I suggest that the concentration-camp phenomenon ought not to be studied. On the contrary, I say that it must be studied more and more, in all its forms and all its expressions." Wiesel, "A Plea for the Survivors," 239.

38 Jacques Derrida, "On Reading Heidegger: An Outline of Remarks to the Essex Colloquium," *Research in Phenomenology* 17 (1987): 177.

39 Jacques Derrida, *Cinders* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1991), 43.

40 In his introduction to Derrida's *Cinders*, Ned Lukacher refers to a gloss provided by Derrida (in his book *Glas*) on Hegel's description of a philosophical all-burning that Hegel refers to as an *Opfer*. In English this is translated as sacrifice, but Derrida suggests that holocaust is a better word, would even be a better word in the original. Yet there is a difference, Lukacher notes, between Hegel's "holocaust" and Derrida's: "Hegel's sacrificial holocaust makes the otherness of the holocaust itself *appear*, it pretends to bring it to presence, while Derrida's holocaust remains entirely other, nonpresent and outside the theorizable limits of ontology, leaving only the cinder traces of an absolute nonmemory." Ned Lukacher, "Introduction: Mourning Becomes Telepathy," in Derrida, *Cinders*, 13. Italics in original.

In *Cinders*, published in French in 1987, Derrida was strongly influenced by the Holocaust poetry of Paul Celan, on which he had published an essay a year earlier.[41] Indeed, the themes that characterize *Cinders*—ashes, absence, singularity, alterity, language—are already present in "Shibboleth: For Paul Celan."[42] In this essay, Derrida analyzes the ways in which Celan's poetry is concerned with the "inscription of invisible, perhaps unreadable, dates: anniversaries, rings, constellations, and repetitions of singular, unique, *unrepeatable* events" (2, italics in original). As Derrida shows, Celan's poetry does not give readers insight into the singular, but through language, it makes the reader aware that there exists a singularity, an otherness that this language does not and cannot represent. The poem is a shibboleth, which "unveils a secret only to confirm that there is something secret there, withdrawn, forever beyond the reach of hermeneutic exhaustion" (26). The singularity that continually hovers above Celan's work as well as Derrida's "Shibboleth" is, as can only go without saying, the Holocaust. And so, in one of Derrida's two direct references to this history, he writes: "Forgive me, if I do not name, here, the *holocaust* … except to say this: there is certainly today the date of that holocaust we know, the hell of our memory: there is a holocaust for every date, and somewhere in the world at every hour. Every hour counts its holocaust" (46, italics in original). According to Nico van der Sijde, this comment recalls that "language revokes singularity, but without language, no poetry about the singular may be written. Singularity is 'incinerated' by language: signs burn and char the other to such an extent that it hardly leaves a trace."[43] And for that reason, both Celan and Derrida refer to the Holocaust only obliquely, through negativity, or through the image of ashes and cinders. If the cipher that is the Holocaust is incinerated through language, it is precisely this not-speaking the Holocaust, or this speaking in shibboleths, that marks Derrida's approach.

In these ways, the most urgent ethical appeal emanates from the Holocaust through the writings of Lyotard and Derrida. Paradoxically, that appeal cannot be ignored, yet it remains practically unanswerable because language itself has become inadequate. The Holocaust has made these thinkers sensitive to the existence and the importance of dimensions of

41 Lukacher, "Introduction," 13, 14.

42 Jacques Derrida, "Shibboleth: For Paul Celan," in *Sovereignties in Question: The Poetics of Paul Celan* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005). Hereafter cited in text.

43 Nico van der Sijde, *Het Literaire Experiment: Jacques Derrida over Literatuur* (Amsterdam and Meppel: Boom, 1998), 370–371. My translation.

knowledge that *defy* reason and philosophy, and to the violence involved in trying to fit this "otherness" in traditional frames and categories. As Van der Sijde explains, "Derrida makes 'holocaust' a metaphor of the scorching and totalitarian tendency that is hidden in thought. And that is in any thought; also in that of himself, also in that of Celan. … All thought, Derrida suggests, has *something* in it of an all-burning."[44] In the work of Lyotard and Derrida, then, some of the most refined instances of the exceptionalist view on the Holocaust are formulated. Yet even in their work, or perhaps precisely in their work, it can be seen that the exceptionalist perspective gives birth to a somewhat forbidding discourse on the Holocaust where participants can only tread with the most extreme caution. The stakes are so great that to speak wrongly about the Holocaust would mean not just that one is a poor scholar or thinker, but something worse than that: a cardinal sinner who debased the memory of the dead.

Precisely from a scholarly perspective, therefore, the exceptionalist approach to the Holocaust harbors within itself a strange ambiguity. On the one hand, the profound ethical concern that characterizes this approach is a way of making reason and scholarship sensitive to precisely those dimensions which elude it and to confront the violence they harbor within themselves. Clearly, this is not just an honorable, but also a valuable endeavor that may initiate a process of introspection and "purging." On the other hand, a penetrating critique of language, reason, and scholarship also risks bringing in the force of unreason at the same time. Noting this is not to dismiss a body of outstanding Holocaust thought and scholarship, but rather a way of drawing attention to those aspects where the exceptionalist approach reaches its own limits. "There is something priestly about [Elie] Wiesel's insistence in guarding the Temple against those who would desecrate it, but there is also something totalitarian about it," Ruth Franklin recently wrote. She thereby rather bitingly calls attention to the possible consequences of that deference, which may in fact be quite problematic. As Franklin puts it, "[p]erhaps we may not judge the deeds of someone who came through the Holocaust, but are we truly not to judge his or her words?"[45] Here Franklin touches upon the fundamental issue at stake: that of judgment and of criticism.

The exceptionalist claims that the Holocaust is unique, absolutely evil, unspeakable, and unrepresentable may have what Mintz calls "prophetic appeal," yet that appeal often comes at the price of sacrificing critical

44 Ibid., 373. My translation.
45 Franklin, *A Thousand Darknesses*, 87, 8–9.

rigor, and sometimes of deactivating the critical faculty altogether. Indeed, George Steiner abruptly cuts off a critical discussion of Chaim Kaplan's diary from the Warsaw Ghetto and Jean-François Steiner's *Treblinka* by saying: "[b]ut enough of the debate. These books and the documents that have survived are not for 'review.'"[46] Whatever the moral force of such gestures may be, to restrain or even to suspend the critical faculty is not just unreasonable, but socially and morally reckless as well. "Absolute uniqueness," Yehuda Bauer writes, "leads to its opposite, total trivialization: if the Holocaust is a onetime, inexplicable occurrence, then it is a waste of time to deal with it."[47] Indeed, Bauer's *reductio ad absurdum* manages to capture the ludicrousness of the exceptionalist perspective's more highflying claims. Still, this may draw away the attention from the very complexity of the problems at stake. The exceptionalist perspective cannot simply be equated with unreason; rather, as an approach to the Holocaust, it is interested in the dynamic relation between reason and that which goes beyond reason, yet in studying this relation, the latter seems to be constantly favored. This is problematic for two closely connected reasons. As Dominick LaCapra explains, on the one hand, "an exclusive emphasis or fixation on unrepresentable excess may divert attention from what may indeed be represented or reconstructed with respect to traumatizing limit events, and should be, as accurately as possible." And on the other hand, "it may lead to a construction of these events in terms of an insufficiently differentiated, rashly generalized, hyperbolic aesthetic of the sublime or even a (positive or negative) sacralization of the event which may prompt a foreclosure, denigration, or inadequate account not only of representation but of the difficult issue of ethically responsible agency both then and now."[48]

These problems are powerfully illustrated by Gary Weissman, when, in the closing pages of his study *Fantasies of Witnessing*, he quotes Rabbi Irving Greenberg's well-known "working principle" to be used in discussions on the Holocaust. Greenberg's working principle holds that "no statement, theological or otherwise, should be made that would not be credible

46 Steiner, *Language and Silence*, 168. Elsewhere, while discussing the poetry of Paul Celan and the role of God in the Holocaust, Steiner notes: "[s]uch concepts are not amenable to rational analysis. Even as Celan's Shoah-poems are not amenable to critical paraphrase or equalising interpretation." George Steiner, "The Long Life of Metaphor: An Approach to 'the Shoah,'" *Encounter* 68 (February 1987): 61.

47 Yehuda Bauer, *Rethinking the Holocaust* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002), 14.

48 Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 2001), 93.

in the presence of the burning children." [49] In his commentary, Weissman suggests that "perhaps no statement better captures the sanctimonious veneration of horror that so often serves to curtail rather than encourage critical thinking about our present-day relationship to the Holocaust. Such statements, it seems to me, promote a kind of dishonesty under the guise of virtuousness."[50] I do not think there is reason to doubt the good intentions of Greenberg or most other "exceptionalist" commentators on the Holocaust, yet it is a real and important point that their extremely charged language—morally, religiously, philosophically—more often serves to obscure than to enlighten. Of course, no abstract theorizing would be appropriate in the presence of children being thrown alive in the burning pits at Auschwitz, Weissman admits, "including, of course, Greenberg's own working principle" (215). But, he continues, "this is precisely not the context in which we make statements about the Holocaust, and pretending that it is limits and distorts understanding of how present concerns shape the historical past" (216). Greenberg and other critics like him, who work by applying such strained moral precepts, risk being blind to the extremely complicated contemporary reality of Holocaust memory. "In an age when false memoirs proliferate," Ruth Franklin rightly notes, "this is simply irresponsible."[51]

Throughout the seventies, eighties, and changing only in the nineties, it was very difficult to speak of the Holocaust in ways that were not endorsed by the exceptionalist position. To speak of the Holocaust in "non-exceptionalist" ways would be to "normalize" the Holocaust and thereby to ultimately betray or even condone it.[52] By putting the Holocaust back into history, one would both excuse the executioners, whilst belittling the deaths of millions of victims. An important case in point here is the *Historikerstreit* (historians' debate) which took place in Germany in the mid-1980s. When conservative historians like Ernst Nolte and Andreas Hillgruber argued for a "normalization" of German history, especially the Holocaust, a fierce polemic erupted that lasted several years. Nolte and

49 Quoted in Gary Weissman, *Fantasies of Witnessing: Postwar Efforts to Experience the Holocaust* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2004), 215. Hereafter cited in the text.

50 Weissman, *Fantasies of Witnessing*, 215. Hereafter cited in the text.

51 Franklin, *A Thousand Darknesses*, 7.

52 Claude Lanzmann, who made the film *Shoah*, follows such a line of thought when he said of the 1978 NBC miniseries *Holocaust* that it "perpetrates a lie, a moral crime; it assassinates memory. … The Hollywood serial transgresses because it trivializes, destroying the unique nature of the Holocaust." Claude Lanzmann, "From Holocaust to 'Holocaust,'" in *Claude Lanzmann's* Shoah*: Key Essays*, ed. Stuart Liebman (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 30.

Hillgruber's opponents, headed by Germany's most influential living philosopher, Jürgen Habermas, attacked these historians for wanting to "rewrite the Nazi past in order to provide a 'positive' or affirmative German identity in the present."[53] Perhaps because of the fact that all of the central participants in the *Historikerstreit* were of age during World War II, the debate was extremely emotionally charged. In fact, the debate was about history as much as it was about good and evil, crime and punishment, guilt and innocence. In this context, arguments could not be separated from the people putting them forward, and the consequences were no significant changes of insight among the exceptionalist historians and their conservative contenders.[54] The highly volatile, conflicted, and well-nigh irresolvable nature of the debate, as well as its participants' profound personal investment in it, underscore that the *Historikerstreit* was also very much a *German* debate about the German past, present, and future. As such, it poses an interesting counterpoint to the American situation, in which, as shall be explored more fully in the next chapter, the Holocaust is generally made sense of in a much less burdensome and vexed manner and with quite different interests and concerns at stake.

Toward a Normalization of Holocaust Discourse; Or, Holocaust Impiety?

Since the late 1980s, roughly, thinking about the Holocaust has started to gradually change in Germany and Europe, and possibly even more clearly

53 Dominick LaCapra, *Representing the Holocaust: History, Theory, Trauma*, (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1994), 43.

54 Richard J. Evans, *In Hitler's Shadow: West German Historians and the Attempt to Escape from the Nazi Past* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1989), 116–117. Evans powerfully writes:

> Thus from the very start, the debate has been locked into two opposing interpretations. Each side has become increasingly entrenched in its own position, and the possibilities of a more nuanced view, in which a synthesis of the most persuasive features of each could be achieved as the basis for moving research forward, has been rendered all but impossible. Such is the political sensitivity of the issues in question, such is the moral charge with which each attempt to stake out a position on these matters has become loaded, that even the slightest move to criticize the one or the other, to mediate between them, or to go beyond them, has met with violent polemics, accusations of trivialization, moral denunciation, and allegations of trying to undermine the West German political system. Thus the bitterness and rancor with which the controversy has been waged. (116–117)

so in the US. As is perhaps most strikingly apparent during commemorative events—Holocaust Memorial Day, Armistice Day, 4 May in the Netherlands, those who consciously lived through the events of World War II are aging and noticeably becoming fewer each year.[55] The story of the Holocaust is now increasingly told by those born after the war. Consequently, contemporary commentators, especially those of the younger generations, are beginning to identify less and less with the exceptionalist approach to the Holocaust. As Zachary Braiterman notes, "[t]he Holocaust may have once constituted a differend, but no longer."[56] Indeed,

> [t]his late, after so many memoirs and testimonies, historical and philosophical studies, novels and movies, icons and images, the Holocaust no longer signifies something uncanny. The first shock that it once registered has itself now become its own memory, to be preserved and respected as such. … In contrast, the second generation of Holocaust-memory cuts more dully as images, if not the reality, of Auschwitz loom a little less large and a little more familiar. (19)

Thus, a significant strand has emerged both in art and in criticism that feels restricted by the debilitating moral precepts of the exceptionalist approach and that looks for ways of calming down and relaxing the enormous emotional tensions that mark this approach. A normalization of Holocaust *discourse* has set in, which, emphatically, should not be confused with a normalization of the Holocaust per se. Instead, the normalization of Holocaust discourse involves a self-reflexive turn, a refreshing appeal to critically reconsider not so much the facts of the Holocaust itself, but the diverse ways in which these facts have been represented.

The most significant intellectual trigger to this process of normalizing Holocaust discourse was the fact that since the late 1980s, the Holocaust

55 In fact, this a point often made in discussions on Holocaust memory. As long ago as 1978, Elie Wiesel wrote: "[f]or the survivors, too, it is getting late. Their number decreases. There are not many left, fewer and fewer. … Their ranks are thinning rapidly." Wiesel, "A Plea for the Survivors," 218. Though it is, of course, an indisputable fact that the eye-witnesses of World War II and the survivors of the Holocaust are aging and passing away, I think it is useful not to over-dramatize the point. The last survivor of the Titanic, Millvina Dean, died in May 2009, almost a hundred years after the sinking. The last combat veteran of World War I, navy man Claude Choules, died in May 2011. In other words, I think it is safe to say that the eyewitnesses of World War II and the Holocaust will be with us for a while to come still.

56 Zachary Braiterman, "Against Holocaust-Sublime: Naive Reference and the Generation of Memory," *History and Memory* 12, no. 2 (2000): 18, doi: 10.1353/ham.2000.0009. Hereafter cited in the text.

became the "pioneering ground" of a new and powerful paradigm in the humanities: (collective or cultural) memory studies. Memory studies, which subscribes to a more or less radical social constructivist epistemology, argues against the notion that the past comes to us in unmediated, pristine form, after careful excavation by archeologists and historians. Instead, both history as well as personal recollection can only surface in mediated forms and in communal frameworks of meaning. In that sense, cultural memory unites all our images of the past.[57] However, the term cultural memory as a critical concept generally refers to the socially constructed images of the past that are current in a given culture, society, or group, and are shaped by the cultural texture and contemporary concerns of that remembering party. Cultural memory, in other words, refers to the ways in which the past is constructed and attributed meaning in the present, by individuals and groups, in inescapably shared, that is to say, social, frameworks of meaning.[58]

One of the crucial insights of memory studies is that the past has no intrinsic meaning; rather, meaning is constructed in the present by those remembering, and is therefore subject to variation and change according to time and place. This insight has important, quite radical consequences for thinking about the Holocaust. Whereas the exceptionalist perspective tended to consider the Holocaust as beyond understanding and beyond explication ("The world of Auschwitz lies outside speech as it lies outside reason," George Steiner writes[59]), memory studies in its more daring manifestations would point out that to say that certain events, like the Holocaust, are beyond meaning is precisely a way of attributing meaning to those events. Most scholars working with the memory paradigm, however, do not seek such direct confrontations with the established exceptionalist perspective, but let themselves be guided by their own research agendas.

57 Jan Assmann notes how cultural memory exists in two modes: "first, in the mode of potentiality of the archive whose accumulated texts, images, and rules of conduct act as a total horizon, and second in the mode of actuality, whereby each contemporary context puts the objectivized meaning into its own perspective, giving it its own relevance." Jan Assmann, "Collective Memory and Cultural Identity," *New German Critique* 65 (Spring-Summer 1995), 130, doi:10.2307/488538.

58 For pertinent and compact theoretical discussions of the concept of cultural memory, see Ann Rigney, "Plenitude, Scarcity and the Circulation of Cultural Memory," *Journal of European Studies* 35, no. 1 (2005): 11–28, doi: 10.1177/0047244105051158; Ann Rigney, "Portable Monuments: Literature, Cultural Memory, and the Case of Jeanie Deans," *Poetics Today* 25, no. 2 (2004): 361–396, doi: 10.1215/03335372-25-2-361.

59 Steiner, *Language and Silence*, 123.

This results in an emphasis on, for instance, national or group memory cultures, Holocaust memorials in the public space, or a literary criticism that, in addition to aesthetics, is remarkably sensitive to socio-historical contexts.[60]

The self-reflexive, normalizing turn in Holocaust discourse is perhaps most apparent in that latter category of literary criticism. Making use of theoretical perspectives derived from poststructuralism, deconstructivism, New Historicism, as well as memory studies, a growing number of literary scholars now offer the most serious challenges to exceptionalist scholarship. An early, daring, and exceptionally perceptive example of such a work is James E. Young's *Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust: Narrative and the Consequences of Interpretation* (1988).[61] Rather than concerning

60 Incidentally, I feel that it is especially because of this sensitivity to socio-historical contexts that cultural memory studies recommends itself more to the analysis of Holocaust literature than cultural trauma theory. This is not to deny, of course, that the concept of memory may have some problems of its own. Most obviously, perhaps, the very term "memory" itself is rather baggy and lends itself to being used imprecisely or uncritically. Moreover, like trauma, the memory concept has a tendency to blur and obscure the distinctions between lived, individual memory and acts of (collective) memorialization of other people's histories. In fact, a very cogent critique of this tendency in some memory scholarship is offered by Gary Weissman in *Fantasies of Witnessing*, 14–18. Nonetheless, it seems to me that memory studies are generally less prone than trauma theory to mystify the ways which the past is mediated and remembered in the present. Trauma theory tends to emphasize the ways in which catastrophic events fail to fully register in individuals or society; thus, it is concerned with how trauma characteristically defies categories of knowledge. The concept of memory, by contrast, emphasizes the inevitably discursive and communicative nature of all forms of remembering the past. Thus, some of the best memory scholarship has blurred the distinctions between lived, individual memory and collective or cultural memory in order to problematize and illuminate precisely the complex ways in which individuals and collectivities relate to the past. That is to say, memory scholarship often draws attention to the ways in which the lived memories of individuals only become meaningful when they enter the symbolic order, and are therefore inseparable from cultural or collective frameworks of understanding. At the same time, though, it is also sensitive to the fact that by collectively remembering the Holocaust, for instance, we do not all of a sudden become Holocaust survivors ourselves. As James Young points out, "even though groups share socially constructed assumptions and values that organize memory into roughly similar patterns, individuals cannot share another's memory any more than they can share another's cortex. They share instead the forms of memory, even the meanings in memory generated by these forms, but an individual's memory remains hers alone." James E. Young, *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993), xi.

61 James E. Young, *Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust: Narrative and the Consequences of Interpretation* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990). Hereafter cited in the text.

himself with aesthetic issues of depicting horror, Young is interested in the more overtly theoretical issue of "the narrative representation of events themselves," and specifically with the question of "how historical memory, understanding, and meaning are constructed in Holocaust narrative" (vii). The study is informed by the fundamental insight that truth and knowledge—including the truth of the Holocaust, and our knowledge of that truth—exist only in the ways we give shape to them in language, representation and memory. For Young, "[t]his is not to deny the historical facts of the Holocaust outside their narrative framing, but only to emphasize the difficulty of interpreting, expressing, and acting on these facts outside of the ways we frame them" (3).

Young's radical linguistic constructivism puts a time-bomb underneath much existing exceptionalist scholarship on the Holocaust and its insistence that the Holocaust lies outside language. Indeed,

> [i]n a literary-critical era when the fundamental metaphorical character of language, thinking, conceiving, and writing is fully acknowledged, it thus becomes all the more puzzling when critics persist in trying to know the Holocaust without recourse to metaphor, as if it were possible to write about it, talk about it, or even narrate its history without figurative language. (89)

With unusual lucidity, Young criticizes the claims often made by writers and scholars that documentary fiction and, in particular, first-hand testimony (including diaries) offer the most authentic—because supposedly most direct—access to the Holocaust. Young points outs that "literary testimonies are not altogether *un*mediated" (32, italics in original), and suggests that claims of testimonial authenticity should be seen as a rhetorical principle, and indeed as the genre's "operative trope" (61). The function of such claims, in other words, is to assert and create testimonial authority, which cannot be taken as literal truth, but rather represents a "rhetorical" truth constructed by the text *itself*, yet that at the same time "[satisfies] the phenomenological need … for this authority" (38).

By observing that claims of testimonial authenticity and authority satisfy a "phenomenological need," even if they cannot be taken literally, Young shows that his approach represents no cynical iconoclasm and is not inspired by a sense of cultural relativism. In fact, "[r]ather than merely deconstructing [Holocaust] narrative or its criticism, or de-historicizing it altogether," Young explains, "I attempt here to re-historicize it by looking beyond interpretation to its consequences in history" (4–5). In other words, the inescapably figurative ways in which the Holocaust is understood does not mean that the connection to the facts, to reality, is

thereby irretrievably severed. Rather, the metaphorical frameworks that structure texts tell us how the facts—which remain meaningless outside of language—are understood in actual, lived life, and how they in turn affect and give shape to reality itself. The key point here is that reality *an sich* remains meaningless until we start interpreting it, and that our interpretations, understandings, and concepts in turn affect that reality. Indeed, "[i]f we recognize this 'poetizing' activity also as one of the bases of worldly praxis," Young explains, "then the issue here becomes not just 'the facts' of the Holocaust, but also their 'poetic'—i.e. narrative—configuration, and how particular representations may have guided writers in both their interpretations of events and their worldly responses to them" (4). And it is precisely this "real life" significance of metaphor that Young has in mind when he emphasizes the need to consider the "consequences of interpretation"; that is to say, interpretations and representation of past realities are not merely isolated signs on paper or in our minds, but in fact shape thoughts and acts in the present.[62]

Ultimately, Young's is an argument for a more self-reflexive and self-critical approach to Holocaust narrative. This would force critics to scrupulously consider the assumptions and consequences of any representation of the Holocaust (which is perforce an interpretation). From such a perspective, the challenge no longer lies in arbitrating between proper and improper, authentic and inauthentic texts. Instead, by turning "not just to the obfuscations of metaphor but also to the illuminations of events both by the tropes and archetypes victims brought to their predicament and by those now based in the Holocaust, through which a post-Holocaust generation has come to understand its own world" (92), a much more nuanced and differentiated form of knowledge may be achieved. With regard to the need for unmediated facts in Holocaust literature, for instance, Young suggests that once this desire is understood, "we might accept this impulse even as we look beyond it" (38).

Young's insistence on considering the consequences of interpretation calls not only for a re-reading of Holocaust narrative, but also for a highly

62 As Young further points out,

> [t]he aim here … is to understand the manner in which historical actuality and the forms in which it is delivered to us may be intertwined: it is to know what happened in how it is represented. This is to suggest that the events of the Holocaust are not only shaped *post factum* in their narration, but that they were initially determined as they unfolded by the schematic ways in which they were apprehended, expressed, and then acted upon. (5)

self-reflexive re-consideration of Holocaust literary criticism. Over the past twenty-five years, this has gradually led to increasingly vocal critiques of exceptionalist literary criticism, aimed specifically at revealing the problems and risks inherent in its more dogmatic assumptions. For instance, Inga Clendinnen's eminently commonsensical *Reading the Holocaust*, written by a historian of ancient American civilizations rather than a Holocaust scholar, sets itself the task of challenging the bafflement, demoralization, and perplexity the Holocaust tends to inspire in those who live in its aftermath. What is important, however, is that the motivation here does not stem from positivistic conceitedness—that is, a lack of self-reflexivity and inability and unwillingness to recognize the limits of rationality—but rather from a moral conviction that "such perplexity is dangerous. In the face of a catastrophe on this scale so deliberately inflicted, perplexity is an indulgence we cannot afford."[63] Not dissimilarly, but from a philosophical perspective, Gillian Rose in *Mourning Becomes the Law* mounts an outright attack against thinkers like Adorno, Lyotard, Habermas, and many others, whom she faults with tending to refer to the Holocaust in terms of "the ineffable." Rose characterizes this stance as "Holocaust piety" and strongly argues against it. "To argue for silence, prayer, the banishment equally of poetry and knowledge, in short, the witness of 'ineffability,' that is, non-representability, is *to mystify something we dare not understand*, because we fear that it may be all too understandable, all too continuous with what we are—human, all too human."[64]

Though Clendinnen and Rose eloquently touch upon the fundamental problems in exceptionalist thought, their directions for more viable ways of thinking about the Holocaust remain vague. Perhaps because Clendinnen is writing "as an outsider … for outsiders," and surely because of the wide range of topics she covers—from historiography, to testimony, literature, and film—she offers many astute observations but rarely achieves analytical profundity.[65] Rose's quarrel, on the other hand, is more with postmodern French philosophy than Holocaust thought per se. Her attack on "Holocaust piety" begs the question whether she would instead sanction something like "Holocaust *im*piety."

Absurd as this perhaps may appear at first sight, I would in fact suggest that the effort of normalizing Holocaust discourse—not the Holocaust as such—involves a certain amount of impiety. The idea that Holocaust dis-

63 Inga Clendinnen, *Reading the Holocaust* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 5.

64 Rose, *Mourning Becomes the Law*, 43.

65 Clendinnen, *Reading the Holocaust*, 4.

course can be normalized without normalizing the Holocaust itself does not go against Young's suggestion that the Holocaust cannot be separated from the discursive tropes by which it is narrated. Instead, it is precisely by critically scrutinizing the language in which it is claimed that the Holocaust must not be normalized that we may come to a closer understanding of the immense stakes involved in this view. Normalization of Holocaust *discourse* consists of achieving the level of self-reflexivity that is necessary to become aware of the consequences of interpretation and of what Clendinnen calls "the seductive powers of elevated language."[66] And this demands a "heretical" willingness to critically question sanctified "truths" (though the risk remains of lapsing into iconoclastic violence).

A critic who has perfectly understood this is Gary Weissman. In his *Fantasies of Witnessing* he performs a highly "impious" and razor-sharp analysis of Holocaust (literary) criticism—not so much to dismiss it, but in order to better understand our fascination with this terrible history. Weissman suggests that at the core of their beings, scholars of the Holocaust are motivated by an unspoken, unacknowledged, and not-understood desire to know the Holocaust directly. Indeed, his central argument is that Holocaust scholars

> are haunted not by the traumatic impact of the Holocaust, but by its absence—by a sense that the Holocaust is not enough with us, the popularity of Holocaust museums and Holocaust movies notwithstanding. Moreover, I contend that, when nonwitnesses take an interest in the Holocaust, they are not overcoming a fearful aversion to its horror but endeavoring to actually feel the horror of what otherwise eludes them.[67]

This desire is ultimately futile and impossible, yet, as Weissman illustrates at length, in highly peculiar ways it motivates many of the claims that Holocaust scholars make. For instance, Weissman argues that it is precisely the desire to come closer to the Holocaust that explains why many critics often vocally dismiss popular Holocaust representations. Popular culture would present the Holocaust too facilely, while true knowledge of the Holocaust entails being acquainted with an "unspeakable," sacrosanct mystery, and can only be achieved after painstaking effort and commitment—like that put in by scholars. Therefore, much scholarship on the Holocaust can be seen as contests over "who *really* knows the horror" of the Holocaust (25). A prime example here is the debate over

66 Ibid., 9.
67 Weissman, *Fantasies of Witnessing*, 22–23.

the appropriate term to describe the destruction of the Jews by the Nazis, an issue that is also relevant to this study, and which therefore deserves a very brief excursus.

Up to this point, I have consistently used the word "Holocaust" without either justifying this term or acknowledging its contested status. As is well-known, however, many commentators object to it because it is felt to have improper religious connotations. The term derives from the Greek holokauston, meaning "whole burnt," and is found in the Septuagint, an ancient bible translation, where it refers to a burnt sacrificial offering made to God.[68] It is this sacrificial connotation, which is Christian, moreover, that many critics find objectionable: they argue that the use of the term Holocaust implies "that God accepted the destruction of the European Jews as a sacrificial offering, and that the Nazis played a quasi-priestly role in preparing this sacrifice."[69] Dismissing "Holocaust" then, they have launched a search for an alternative term. "Churban," "The Event," and "The Tremendum," have all been suggested, but by now the Hebrew "Shoah" has emerged as the most serious contender. Weissman is fairly skeptical about this battle over terminology, though. He points out that few English-speakers today are aware of the sacrificial, religious connotations of the term "Holocaust," or would directly relate them to the present use of the term. Moreover, he suggests, the desire to replace "Holocaust" with "*the* proper name for this event … reflects a desire to get closer to the actual horror of the death camps than this now popular term allows—and to separate oneself from the masses of ordinary people who have heard of 'the Holocaust' by giving one's own relationship to the event a special name" (25, italics in original). Using such an "un-PC" perspective, Weissman questions both the scholarly rewards in searching for *the* appropriate term, as well as the narcissism involved in such a search. Because of these reasons, and because "[a]s a term, 'the Holocaust' suggests not only the Jewish genocide but its Americanization, not only the event but the attempt to name or represent it" (26), I will, like Weissman, use the term "Holocaust" throughout this study.

As long as it remains unacknowledged and insufficiently understood, the desire to come closer to the Holocaust and to achieve direct knowledge of it has potentially problematic consequences, both on a moral and on an epistemological level. One significant problem Weissman discusses at some length is that "[t]he desire to feel more connected to the Holocaust

68 Young, *Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust*, 87.

69 Weissman, *Fantasies of Witnessing*, 24. Hereafter cited in the text.

leads some Jewish Americans to regard *themselves* as Holocaust survivors" (14, italics in original). There is a distinct trend among both artists and critics to broaden the status of victimhood and survivorship from Hitler's actual targets to encompass, beyond generations and distance, also their descendants or those who identify with them. Weissman does not mean to suggest that the children of Holocaust survivors or even those not immediately related to this history are not affected by it in profound and sometimes quite haunting ways. But he does object to the ways in which recent and influential scholarship has, through terms like "postmemory," "secondary witnesses," or "witnesses through the imagination," contributed "to a wishful blurring of otherwise obvious and meaningful distinctions between the victims and ourselves, and between the Holocaust and our own historical moment" (20).[70] Not only is such an obscuring of differences between witnesses and nonwitnesses morally questionable, but it also impedes historical and critical analysis. Were it not for the fact that Weissman is critiquing a highly influential and popular strand of scholarship, rather than a fringe group of histrionic and narcissistic pseudo-academics, Weissman's point may sound hardly more than commonsensical. Yet to be commonsensical (in the best, critical sense of the term) in the highly emotionally charged field of Holocaust studies is to be politically incorrect and impious.

With regard to the problem of the representation of the Holocaust, Weissman's impiety also leads to unusually lucid insights. For Weissman, the central and unavoidable claim in Holocaust thought that the Holocaust is unrepresentable, unspeakable, etcetera, serves to remind us of the extreme difficulty of truly coming to know what the Holocaust "was really like." Like other critics of the exceptionalist perspective, Weissman uses the *reductio ad absurdum* to make the point that claims of the Holocaust's unrepresentability "effectively demand a degree of fidelity to the past that is impossible to realize, as it would ultimately require a representation to *be* the reality that it represents" (208, italics in original). But he also goes a step further than this with the suggestion that these claims have less to do

70 The term "postmemory" is introduced by Marianne Hirsch in her study *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory* (Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 1997). The term "secondary witnessing" is used by Dora Apel in *Memory Effects: The Holocaust and the Art of Secondary Witnessing* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002). Taking the term "witness through the imagination" from the novelist Norma Rosen, S. Lillian Kremer wrote the study *Witnesses Through the Imagination: Jewish American Holocaust Literature* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1989).

with actual facts than with an inability to appropriately respond to these facts. Weissman suggests that we resort to the claim of unspeakablity not because the Holocaust inspires in us "appropriate grief and indignation," but "because we face great difficulty in feeling anything comparable to what we imagine the victims and witnesses of such horrors must have felt. It may be easier to refer to 'indescribable' atrocities than to find words to describe what we take to be our own moral inadequacy in responding to descriptions of horror" (209). As for Young, the point in making such a "scandalous" remark is not mere iconoclasm, but to come to a more critical understanding. In fact, Weissman continues by noting that vast numbers of books and articles are now available about the Holocaust and in a large contingent of them, the issue of representation is a central concern. This is strikingly borne out by the popularity of phrases like "speaking the unspeakable" or "imagining the unimaginable." However, precisely what these phrases do, Weissman suggests, is to "point to the actual problem facing us, which is not that the Holocaust is unrepresentable, but that it is *only representable*" (209, italics in original).

Especially in the contemporary context of Holocaust discourse and writing, Weissman's perspective is useful, because it forces us to thoroughly reconsider the commonly held view that there is a relationship between the ever-growing abundance of Holocaust representations and the feeling that the reality of the Holocaust becomes ever more elusive. Weissman acknowledges and attempts to understand that very feeling by describing it as a desire to know the Holocaust directly while explaining that it is ultimately a futile desire. At the same time, he points out that representation is not an impediment to knowledge of the Holocaust, but rather the only available route toward it. This insight fundamentally changes the nature of literary criticism concerned with the Holocaust, because the point will now no longer be to describe the ways in which (works of) literature succeed in bringing or fail to bring us closer to an ultimate, unmediated, truthful knowledge of the Holocaust, but rather to fathom the highly particular understandings of the Holocaust that (literary) texts create through inevitably representational means. This emphasis on representation leads to a normalization and "democratization" of Holocaust literature and literary criticism, as it is no longer a select canon of works that merits critical attention, but potentially all of Holocaust literature.[71]

71 Such a normalized critical perspective is all the more expedient as "Holocaust impiety" seems an emerging trend in the arts as well. See for instance Matthew Boswell, *Holocaust Impiety in Literature, Popular Music, and Film* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

Holocaust memory in contemporary America is shaped by an enormous diversity of media encounters, ranging from the "serious" genres of survivor testimony and literary fiction, to the unabashedly commercially driven ones of Hollywood movies, Discovery Channel documentaries, and *The Oprah Winfrey Show*. Because of the immense variety of cultural products that shape Holocaust memory—in which, arguably, the popular, mass-products are the most influential—it seems self-defeating to argue for a restrictively "correct" Holocaust aesthetic. This is no admission of defeat to the putatively destructive forces of popular and mass culture, nor an uncritical celebration of popular culture. Instead, with regard to Holocaust discourse, it is an argument to self-critically and self-reflexively take into account less how culture *should* speak and write about the Holocaust than how it *does* speak and write about it. Indeed, it is an argument to ask not so much to what extent, say, literature is faithful to the "original" Holocaust, but in what ways it *actually* proposes to remember and commemorate these events in all sorts of historically, socially, and culturally contingent ways. In the sense that this goes against the grain of long-established intellectual approaches with a lot of moral leverage, one might call this a form of Holocaust impiety. Yet presently, such an impious, normalized perspective toward Holocaust discourse will allow for a greater scholarly yield. An important requisite for such an approach is that it remains sensitive to the force of the "prophetic admonitions of the exceptionalist position," which bid us even today—perhaps especially today—"never to lose sight of the irreparable horror and the extremity of human abasement."[72] In fact, it seems to be precisely a failure in this respect that, according to many Holocaust scholars, mars the certainly impious work on contemporary Holocaust memory of "pseudo-scholars like Norman Finkelstein, author of *The Holocaust Industry: Reflections on the Exploitation of Jewish Suffering* and distinguished ones like historian Peter Novick, author of *The Holocaust in American Life*," as Lawrence Langer writes in a recent review.[73] Like any other complex and sensitive topic, thinking about the Holocaust has always placed enormous demands on the critical and moral acuity of scholars. But as the Holocaust slowly recedes from the realm of living memory and becomes overwhelmingly dependent on highly mediated representations, we cannot afford to be either possessive or dismissive about the ways in which the memory of the Ho-

72 Mintz, *Popular Culture*, 83.

73 Lawrence L. Langer, "The Erosion of the Holocaust," review of *The End of the Holocaust*, by Alvin Rosenfeld, *The Jewish Daily Forward*, 15 June 2011, http://www.forward.com/articles/138699/.

locaust circulates in contemporary American culture. Therefore, in order to understand its contemporary and American dimensions, a normalized perspective on Holocaust discourse, including literature, is indispensable.

2

Does Memory Really Travel?

Historical Consciousness and the Americanization of the Holocaust

One important consequence of the normalization of Holocaust discourse is that the traditional insistence on this history's unspeakable and unrepresentable nature becomes quite problematic and untenable. As James E. Young writes, "[r]ather than seeing metaphors as threatening to the facts of the Holocaust, we must recognize that they are our only access to the facts, which cannot exist apart from the figures delivering them to us."[1] Consequently, the critical challenge no longer lies in erecting boundaries against the Holocaust's representation, but in studying and understanding the many and diverse ways in which it *has* been represented. In this respect, it is striking that among the very many representations of the Holocaust, a disproportionately large number, and, in fact, many of the most widespread and influential ones, are *American* representations. Yet the US clearly is a special context for Holocaust memory. After all, the Holocaust did not take place on American soil, nor were Americans its victims—aspects which are important factors in, respectively, European and Israeli discourse on the Holocaust. And yet, the Holocaust has become a salient landmark, figuratively as well as literally, in American memory culture. With the rise of memory studies and the awareness it brought of the ways in which images of the past are shaped in popular consciousness, a host of scholars have set out to chart and analyze the nature and origins of Holocaust memory in the United States and to explain this memory's perhaps unexpected centrality. Consequently, there is no shortage today of scholarly literature on this theme; indeed, the numerous studies that have appeared in recent years range from fairly general histories to more spe-

1 James E. Young, *Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust: Narrative and the Consequences of Interpretation* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990), 91.

cialized ones, and from abstruse literary criticism to discussions of popular and mass culture.[2]

Yet despite the wealth of available knowledge and scholarship, the nature of Holocaust memory in the United States remains bitterly contested. Symptomatic in this respect is the profound sense of discord that is inspired by the so-called Americanization of the Holocaust. This oft-used concept represents to many an objectionable process of trivialization and commercialization of Holocaust memory, whereas others consider it as the only way for Americans to come to terms with the Holocaust at all. A significant spokesman of the latter view is Michael Berenbaum, who, as Deputy Director of the President's Commission on the Holocaust, Project Director of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, and Director of this museum's Institute of Advanced Holocaust Studies, played a crucial role in promulgating the very idea of the Holocaust's Americanization. Berenbaum considers the Americanization of the Holocaust "an honorable task" that is about telling the history of the Holocaust "in such a way that it would resonate not only with the survivor in New York and his children in Houston or San Francisco, but with a black leader from Atlanta, a midwestern farmer, or a northeastern industrialist." Indeed, it is a way of telling this history in fundamentally American terms, which entails a reshaping of the history of the Holocaust in order for it "to participate in the fundamental tale of pluralism, tolerance, democracy, and human rights that America tells about itself."[3] By contrast, literary critic Alvin H. Rosenfeld refers to the Americanization of the Holocaust with a sense of alarm and disgust, suggesting that one typological strand in this process is a "cult

2 A well-known though controversial general history is Peter Novick, *The Holocaust and Collective Memory: The American Experience* (London: Bloomsbury, 2001). Original US edition published under the title *The Holocaust in American Life*. Also very useful is Hasia R. Diner, *We Remember with Reverence and Love: American Jews and the Myth of Silence after the Holocaust, 1945–1962* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2009); as well as Alan Mintz, *Popular Culture and the Shaping of Holocaust Memory in America* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2001). On a more specialized level, consider, for instance: Edward T. Linenthal, *Preserving Memory: The Struggle to Create America's Holocaust Museum* (New York: Penguin, 1997); and Jeffrey Shandler, *While America Watches: Televising the Holocaust* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999). There are many studies of Holocaust fiction, many of which consider American authors. A work of literary criticism with an exclusively (Jewish) American focus is S. Lillian Kremer, *Witnesses Through the Imagination: Jewish American Holocaust Literature* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1989).

3 Michael Berenbaum, *After Tragedy and Triumph: Modern Jewish Thought and the American Experience* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 20, 40–42.

of victimhood" while another strand, "no less sentimental, derives from a seemingly opposite trait: the American tendency to downplay or deny the dark and brutal sides of life and to place a preponderant emphasis on the saving power of individual moral conduct and collective deeds of redemption."[4] On one level, Berenbaum's and Rosenfeld's diametrically opposed views on the Americanization of the Holocaust reflect distinct differences in outlook and temperament, whereby the memory of the Holocaust functions as a kind of social-political and intellectual litmus test. On another level, the general dissension on the topic of the Americanization of the Holocaust, with its rather normative focus on the ways the Holocaust is best remembered, bears witness to a significant *scholarly* problem: it shows that what it really means to represent and understand the Holocaust from an American perspective remains only marginally understood.

I would suggest that the key to this problem is understanding the consequences of interpretation, as James Young has termed it, or, to conceive the challenge somewhat more broadly, the consequences of *representation* in the American context.[5] One such consequence is that if the Holocaust is not *un*representable, but *only* representable, as Gary Weissman has suggested, this means that one cannot grasp or know the past whole and immediately.[6] Instead, one can only understand the Holocaust through the mediation of language and representation, which is to say that one can only know the past by *relating* to it from a historically, geographically, and culturally contingent perspective or position in the present. On such a view, it is beside the point and therefore misleading to dismiss the Americanization of the Holocaust for being un-historical, because "Americanization" and historiography rather seem to represent very different ways of relating to the past. At the same time, to embrace Americanized representations of the Holocaust as the only means for American culture to encounter the Holocaust risks obscuring the continuity and overlap between scholarly and popular Americanized approaches to the Holocaust. Both views fail to acknowledge that Americanized representations of the Holocaust *as well as* scholarly and historical representations are as much about present-day generations remembering the past as they are about the past itself. As such, they differ not so much in quality or in nature; indeed, *both* are historically and culturally contingent representations. The only thing that separates

4 Alvin H. Rosenfeld, "The Americanization of the Holocaust," *Commentary* 99, no. 6 (June 1995): 37.

5 Young, *Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust*, 4.

6 Gary Weissman, *Fantasies of Witnessing: Postwar Efforts to Experience the Holocaust* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2004), 209.

them is that they bring very different contemporary concerns to bear in their respective relationships to the past. Consequently, there is little to be gained by hailing historiography as the more responsible approach to the Holocaust, or by justifying Americanization for being necessary and inevitable.[7] The challenge, rather, lies in penetrating the ways in which each carry very different consequences of interpretation.

Since the pioneering work in the philosophy of history by authors like Michel Foucault, Hayden White, and those who followed in their wake, what might be termed the consequences of historical interpretation have been studied in depth.[8] We now understand the "tropological" nature of historical discourse and that professional requirements such as evidence, objectivity, facts and facticity are textual constructs. They do not really present or uncover the past as such, but they rather function as rhetorical tools that create and maintain the *illusion* of an objective grasp of the past, whereas in fact they offer a *mediated relationship* to the past.[9] Moreover, we can trace back the origins of the tropes of historical discourse to nineteenth century Europe and the development of historiography as a scientific discourse, much informed by ideologies of scientific positivism. However, a similarly detailed and incisive analysis of the consequences of more popular, non-professional and particularly American ways of representing the past thus far remains largely underdeveloped. Yet this lack prevents an adequate understanding of the significance of the Holocaust to contemporary American culture, which, after all, is borne witness to less by professional history rather than by an overwhelming quantity of more popular, Americanized representations. Therefore, what is needed in addition to an understanding of the tropics of historical discourse is a similar typology of the particularly American relationship to the Holocaust.

7 Young in fact writes that "[w]ithout keeping in mind the more subtly symbolic nature of historical discourse itself, … we … risk a certain uncritical complacency, in which we privilege one kind of knowledge about the Holocaust over another, when we might only be comparing one kind of knowledge with another." *Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust*, 7.

8 See, for instance Hayden White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1987); and Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1978).

9 Of course this is not to dismiss either historiography or history as such; it is to emphasize that knowledge of the past is ever to relate to the past in the present, mediated by language and representation. It is to say that history and time-traveling are strictly separate disciplines; only the former has thus far proven to lie within the realm of human possibilities.

Of course, the much-discussed Americanization of the Holocaust appears as the key concept that would address the particularly American ways in which the Holocaust has been represented over the years. However, in much current writing on the topic, this concept tends to be used in a superficial manner at best. Yet to understand what it means to represent and understand the Holocaust from an American perspective requires a thorough analysis of how Americans and American culture relate not only to this history in particular but to the past as such. That is to say, the Americanization of the Holocaust is not only about the ways in which this history is represented in relation to distinctly American concerns in the present; far from being merely random or wholly contingent, these American concerns are themselves already part of, or produced by, a distinctly American worldview and interpretative logic. In fact, professional historiography offers a useful analogy in this respect: the specific historical questions that guide historians in their work are not straightforwardly and immediately determined by the past itself, but are always already shaped by certain key professional assumptions about (the representation of) the past. The Americanization of the Holocaust, then, refers to forms of remembering this history in ways that from the very outset are shaped by what may be termed a distinctly American historical consciousness. To understand the Americanization of the Holocaust in these terms entails shifting the focus from the question of how the Holocaust should be represented to that of how it has in fact been represented in the US. And it is precisely such a shift of focus that enables a less embroiled and more comprehensive understanding of this history's significance to contemporary American culture. Indeed, from such a perspective, what stands out about (popular) American representations of the Holocaust is not so much that they would distort and reduce the historical record, but precisely the ways in which they seek to view it in popular, personalized, contemporary, and moral terms.

The Americanization of the Holocaust and the Travels of Memory

In scholarly as well as more popular writing about Holocaust memory, the concept of the Americanization of the Holocaust is often invoked but rarely or only superficially defined, as if it is immediately apparent what the concept entails. Of course, it is possible that most people intuitively sense what is meant by this term. Yet I would caution that it is precisely its apparent straightforwardness that is deceiving. Indeed, as Hilene Flanzbaum notes, "[o]n one level, the phrase simply groups the many ways that the Holocaust has been represented in American culture; on another, it is

political and theoretical quicksand, providing all the pitfalls of postulating about history, nation, and ideology."[10] Michael Berenbaum's definition, quoted above and often referred to by other authors, answers to that first level Flanzbaum discerns, yet avoids the second level of greater conceptual complexity. In a similar vein, John K. Roth writes that

> the Americanization of the Holocaust refers to the ways in which the Holocaust is interpreted and institutionalized by and for Americans—Jews and non-Jews alike. More specifically, it involves interpretations and forms of institutionalizing that reflect and support interests, outlooks, and values that resonate with American history, identity, and hopes for the future.[11]

Though it is hard to disagree with such descriptions, they say little more than that the Americanization of the Holocaust is about adapting the memory of the Holocaust to the distinct American situation, while begging the more fundamental question of how *exactly* that adaptation process functions and what *exactly* it entails. It has been well-illustrated that the shape of Holocaust memory differs very much from country to country. Yet critics speak of the Americanization of the Holocaust, but to the best of my knowledge never of its Russification, Hispanicization, or even Israelification. With regard to Holocaust memory, then, the American dimension appears to be rather special, justifying the use of a term like Americanization. But if that is the case, the question of what might be this special dimension cannot be answered with generalizations.

Again, the problem is not that we do not know enough about the Holocaust in American culture. Scholars like James Young, Peter Novick, Hasia Diner, and many others, most of them historians, have very insightfully succeeded in placing Holocaust discourse within the contemporary dynamics of American culture. Yet the point of focus in such studies tends to be Holocaust memory, rather than American memorial culture as such. This I would call a historiographical bias, and it is a problem, because the Americanization of the Holocaust is fundamentally an American *cultural* process that more or less "incidentally" concerns the history of the Holocaust. In other words, what is needed is a little more American Studies to inform Holocaust Studies. Still, such an emphatically American Studies approach tends to get short shrift because of the fact that,

10 Hilene Flanzbaum, "Introduction: The Americanization of the Holocaust," in *The Americanization of the Holocaust*, ed. Hilene Flanzbaum (Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1999), 2.

11 John K. Roth, *Holocaust Politics* (Louisville, London, and Leiden: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 14.

for a while now, Holocaust and memory studies have been fascinated particularly by the ways in which memory is able to "travel"—witness the popularity of terms like transcultural, global, cosmopolitan, and multidirectional memory. Each of these terms is motivated by an awareness that contemporary memory has become a "glocal" affair: as memory circulates around the globe through modern media, it continually adapts itself to local circumstances in the present in order to be meaningful. But what is striking in recent scholarship concerned with memory's "glocalization" is that, despite its paradoxical nature, "glocal" memory is dealt with almost exclusively in terms of the universality and transferability of memory, rather than in terms of incommensurability; that is to say, instances when memory does *not* travel. But this presupposes—problematically, I believe—that people and cultures think about history and the past in similar, universal ways.

A very interesting case in this respect is *The Holocaust and Memory in the Global Age* (originally published in German in 2001) by Daniel Levy and Natan Sznaider.[12] Whereas Pierre Nora influentially linked (collective) memory to the nation-state, Levy and Sznaider are concerned with the status and future of memory in a post-national age of globalization. In this era, they argue, "the traces of memory now travel freely across borders" (14), and it is in fact this "nation-transcending dynamic" (4) that stands at the center of their analysis. To them, the memory of the Holocaust represents the paradigmatic example of a globalized memory. By comparing the discourse of Holocaust memory in Germany, Israel, and the United States, Levy and Sznaider intend to show how a "dual process of particularization and universalization has produced a transnational symbol that is based on a cosmopolitanized memory—one that does not replace national collective memories but exists as their horizon" (13). In many ways, the argument launched by Levy and Sznaider is original, perceptive, and convincing. Not only do they illustrate how "the Holocaust" has become a globally recognized symbol, but also that through processes of universalization, de-territorialization, as well as Americanization, the global memory of the Holocaust has been adapted to resonate in highly particular ways in specific national as well as international contexts. In fact, they show that the Holocaust's "strength as a global collective memory has been powered and maintained precisely through the fiery interaction between the local and the global" (13).

12 Daniel Levy and Natan Sznaider, *The Holocaust and Memory in the Global Age* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006). Hereafter cited in the text.

Levy and Sznaider's analysis characterizes globalized discourse on Holocaust memory as an essentially harmonious process of successful communication. They speak of a cosmopolitan memory that has become possible through "a nonlinear, dialectical process in which the global and local exist not as cultural opposites but, rather, as mutually binding and interdependent principles" (9–10). In fact, Levy and Sznaider suggest that "a dynamic relationship between the local and the global increasingly has become determined by cosmopolitan memory" (8). Though I am sympathetic to their claims up to a point, Levy and Sznaider ultimately present an idealized account of global memory discourse that leaves little or no room for failures of communication or what we might call commemorative short-circuiting. As Levy and Sznaider acknowledge, globalization is often viewed negatively for fears that it is a unifying force that levels out cultural complexity. However, "[w]hen we talk about Holocaust memories becoming more cosmopolitan," Levy and Sznaider point out, "we are not suggesting that they are now 'universal' in the sense that one unified interpretation exist. The Holocaust will certainly not become a 'totalizing' referent that means the same thing to everyone" (8). Precisely for this reason, then, it seems odd that Levy and Sznaider neglect to consider to what extent global or cosmopolitan Holocaust memory may provoke what Jean-François Lyotard has termed a *différend*—"phrases in dispute"—or, incommensurable confrontations in language.[13]

Interestingly, Levy and Sznaider also consider the Americanization of the Holocaust solely in terms of the universal and the cosmopolitan, while ignoring the issue what is specifically American about it. Without ever giving a precise definition of the term, they refer to the Americanization of the Holocaust many times, claiming that "the 'Americanization' of the Holocaust … is also its universalization" (12). At times, it almost seems as if Americanization has less to do with America than with the global sphere: "[t]hrough its Americanization, the Holocaust is removed from its exclusively European point of reference and becomes de-territorialized" (153). Indeed, in discussing the phenomenon, Levy and Sznaider aim "to determine how the Americanization of the Holocaust has played a role in making the remembrance of the event a globally relevant memory" (132). This is an important point: as a hegemonic cultural force, American (popular) culture has certainly much influenced Holocaust memory around the world, to the extent that the Americanization of the Holocaust has indeed become

13 Jean-François Lyotard, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988).

a global phenomenon. But this does not mean that Americanization and globalization are one and the same process; in fact, this is still to beg the question of what it means to Americanize in the first place. As in their view on the globalization of memory, then, Levy and Sznaider again favor the universal and communicable over the particular and incommensurable. Surely, though, these latter dimensions of the Americanization of the Holocaust must not be overlooked. Americanization may certainly entail a universalization of the Holocaust, but that is only half the story.

The strong emphasis on the travels of memory risks obscuring the fact that remembering the past is an activity undertaken by individuals, groups, and institutions who perform that activity from historical and moral perspectives that are unique and irreducible. For that reason, it is necessary to allow for the possibility that modern cultures experience and think about history (or historicity) in radically different ways. This is especially important in an age when memory is simultaneously global and local, and inter- and intracultural understanding and solidarity are increasingly difficult to achieve. We must become more responsive, therefore, to the paradox of memory, namely that memory is transferable, communicable, sharable, and, simultaneously, that it is not: that memory is also fundamentally incommensurable, context-bound, incommunicable. What does it mean, for instance, when Michael Berenbaum writes that the Holocaust constitutes "a violation of every American value," and that it "cuts against the grain of the American ethos"?[14] I would venture the claim that the Holocaust cuts against the grain of the Irish, Norwegian, or New Zealand ethos as well, but that, surely, is not the point. Rather, what we must learn to understand is that there is an entire and distinct worldview behind a statement like Berenbaum's, the full portent of which cannot be penetrated easily. We may revel in the glocalization of memory and scholarship, but if we fail to truly differentiate between the universal and the particular in instances as these, we may be worse off than the good people of Babel, who at least *knew* they were speaking in different tongues.

Historical Consciousness in the US

In studying the ways in which individuals, groups, and societies make sense of the past, I want to contend that an important category to consid-

14 Michael Berenbaum, *The World Must Know: The History of the Holocaust as Told in the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum*, 2nd ed. (Washington, D.C.: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2006), xx.

er in addition to history and memory is that of historical consciousness. Though the term "historical consciousness" is not uncommon in historiographical parlance, the concept has had a somewhat inconspicuous existence in recent decades while memory studies have held the limelight. Still, the concept, which has a venerable history going back to Hegel and Wilhelm Dilthey,[15] adds a significant dimension to the ways in which memory studies and history itself theorize our ways of dealing with and making sense of the past.

A more common concept in continental rather than Anglo-American historiographical thought,[16] historical consciousness is often considered as a fundamentally modern and intellectual achievement by which people have learned to appreciate that everything present has a history. Thus, the German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer suggests in an influential essay on the topic that "[o]ur present-day consciousness of history is fundamentally different from the manner in which the past appeared to any foregoing people or epoch. We understand historical consciousness to be the privilege of modern man to have a full awareness of the historicity of everything present and the relativity of all opinions."[17] Moreover, as such a modern and intellectual achievement ("a privilege, perhaps even a burden," writes Gadamer[18]), the concept has in recent years sometimes been referred to as the antithesis to (collective or cultural) memory. For instance, in *The Holocaust in American Life*, Peter Novick writes that "[h]istorical consciousness, by its nature, focuses on the *historicity* of events. … Memory, by contrast, has no sense of the passage of time; it denies the 'pastness' of its objects and insists on their continuing presence."[19] In a similar vein, Saul

15 Christian Laville, "Historical Consciousness and Historical Education: What to Expect from the First for the Second," in *Theorizing Historical Consciousness*, ed. Peter Seixas (Toronto, Buffalo, and London: University of Toronto Press, 2004), 168.

16 Ibid., 168; also Hans-Georg Gadamer, "The Problem of Historical Consciousness," in *Interpretative Social Science: A Second Look*, eds. Paul Rabinow and William M. Sullivan (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1987), 97–108. More trivial but nonetheless telling evidence to corroborate the claim that "historical consciousness" is primarily a European scholarly concern is the fact that there is presently (January 2014), no English entry on historical consciousness or historical awareness on the English language version of Wikipedia. There are entries, though, on "Geschichtsbewusstsein," "conscience historique," and "historisch besef" on respectively the German, French, and Dutch versions of Wikipedia.

17 Hans-Georg Gadamer, "The Problem of Historical Consciousness," 89.

18 Ibid., 89.

19 Novick, *The Holocaust and Collective Memory*, 4. Italics in original. Novick's contrasting of historical consciousness with collective memory is also noted by Peter Seixas, "Introduction," in Seixas, *Theorizing Historical Consciousness*, 9.

Friedlander argues that "[c]ollective memory subsumes discrete events in a larger framework of unchallenging mythical models of interpretation. … Obversely, historical consciousness is by definition *the consciousness of the passage of time and of the possibility of interpreting diverse events within the context of their temporal setting*."[20]

Though these characterizations of historical consciousness by Gadamer, Novick, and Friedlander offer useful starting points, there are some problems attached to viewing the concept as an exclusively modern and intellectual achievement, as well to considering it as the opposite of the concept of memory. Again, such a view is to valorize and favor one particular approach or relationship to the past as the only proper and truly historical one. But it obscures that a historical or dialectical understanding of the past is as much a culturally contingent *relationship* to the past as is, say, a cyclical understanding of the passage of time. As Peter Seixas has demonstrated, to say that historical consciousness is an essentially modern, intellectual phenomenon often equals saying that it is an essentially *European* (or Western) achievement—an advanced state of culture that other cultures or civilizations simply have not reached yet.[21] Instead of such an essentially exclusive, Eurocentric perspective, it would be more interesting and rewarding to posit a characteristically European historical consciousness as one historically specific embodiment of the phenomenon—for instance as a critical or dialectical historical consciousness—and consequently ask what other forms have been developed elsewhere and/or in different ages. Moreover, when historical consciousness is taken as an exclusively modern and intellectual achievement, "informed by the cultural tools developed in professional history," as Seixas puts it (9), and is then contrasted with the notion of cultural or collective memory, the latter is reduced to a vestige of pre-modern mythical experience. As such, the contrast between historical consciousness and memory relies on a problematic simplification (and negative evaluation) of memory, but additionally it also shuts the door to an understanding of how historical consciousness might inform both memory *and* history. Indeed, Seixas suggests that to contrast historical consciousness with memory "may foreshorten exactly those important discussions about the interplay between history and memory that the term 'historical consciousness' potentially opens up, and which are centrally

20 Saul Friedlander, "The End of Innovation? Contemporary Historical Consciousness and the 'End of History,'" *SubStance* 19, no. 62/63 (1990): 30, http://www.jstor.org/stable/3684665. Italics in original.

21 Peter Seixas, "Introduction," in Seixas, *Theorizing Historical Consciousness*, 9. Hereafter cited in the text.

important for our own cultural moment, where the two are tangled and confounded" (9).[22]

In order to avoid these problems, therefore, Peter Seixas proposes "to adopt an inclusive notion of historical consciousness by incorporating all those modes of understanding that are included in 'collective memory'" (9). What is distinctive about historical consciousness, however, is that it is also a more encompassing term than collective memory that "[allows] for the coexistence in any one culture and, indeed, in any one individual, of fundamentally different *types* of historical consciousness" (9, italics in original). Seixas thus uses the concept of historical consciousness "to maintain collective memory's attention to broad popular understandings of the past," while at the same time "bringing to the forefront … the problematic relationships between the distinctly modern, disciplinary practices of historiography and the memory practices of broader populations across different cultures and across different eras" (9–10). In such a way, historical consciousness draws attention not so much to the differences between history and memory but rather to critical connections between those two ways of approaching the past. But at the same time, the notion of historical consciousness also highlights something that often tends to be obscured by the concepts of both history and memory: namely that to understand the past is inevitably to *relate* to the past from a culturally contingent perspective in the present. As a result, interpretations of the past and indeed the consequences of interpretation differ across (and within) cultures and across times and places.

Adopting Seixas's broad and inclusive perspective, I propose that historical consciousness may be conceived of as *the conditioned capability or inclination to appreciate historicity*. If history and memory constitute different (though interrelated) ways or modes of looking at the past,

22 In fact, such a more inclusive view seems to be allowed by Amos Funkenstein, who suggests that the concept of historical consciousness mediates between collective memory and history (as historiography). In contrast to many other historians (notably Pierre Nora), Funkenstein argues that history and memory are not opposed to each other, but the former arises out of the latter *through* the development of historical consciousness. "[R]eflection on the contents of collective memory gives rise to increasing freedom in their individual implementation." That is to say, the more collective memory allows diverse uses of its contents, "the more complex and less predictable the story of history becomes. … I propose the concept of historical consciousness in this precise meaning as such a dynamic heuristic construct—the degree of creative freedom in the use and interpretation of the contents of collective memory." Amos Funkenstein, "Collective Memory and Historical Consciousness," *History and Memory* 1, no. 1 (Spring-Summer 1989): 11, http://www.jstor.org/stable/25618571.

historical consciousness calls attention to the very dispositions that bring them forth. In other words, historical consciousness is the set of parameters that determine how individuals or groups view, appreciate, speak, and write of the historicity of the past (and present). Thus, historical consciousness is not unlike a grammar that determines how in a given language sentences are made, and what can be said meaningfully and what not. What is important here is that this set of parameters is dependent on, or more precisely, *conditioned* by, general cognitive, as well as variable local, cultural, ideological, and historical factors. This means that historical consciousness should be seen less as a discrete quality that a culture either has or has not, but rather as one that may vary across cultures and groups. It does not exclusively represent a strictly scientific or empirical view, but that is not to say that it lacks coherence or structure. Rather, historical consciousness is part of a culturally specific perspective on the world, and is closely related to a culture's guiding moral outlook.

The idea that there may be fundamentally different forms of historical consciousness across various cultures and peoples touches directly upon the ways the Americanization of the Holocaust might be theorized. Specifically, it suggests that the Americanization of the Holocaust may be seen as an effect or product of a characteristically American historical consciousness. Of course, this is an eminently hypothetical or even heuristic proposition that resists ready empirical substantiation. However, it is helpful in this respect to connect such an American historical consciousness to what Raymond Williams termed a "structure of feeling." Williams introduced this concept to denote "meanings and values as they are actively lived and felt," in contrast to the "more formal concepts of 'world-view' or 'ideology.'"[23] That is to say, the term structure of feeling is meant to identify not so much a fully rationalized, systematic, and closed system of thought, but rather the much more affective ways in which reality itself is experienced as an ongoing, open-ended process, and yet in ways that are meaningful and are therefore to a considerable extent *structured*. Representing ongoing, lived experience, structures of feeling are notoriously difficult to study, as they by their very nature defy and exhaust fixed and systematic definitions. Consequently, any analysis of a distinctly American historical consciousness is a risky endeavor that is bound from the outset to simplify and generalize Americans' and American culture's relationships to the past. And yet, ironically, the admittedly crude tool of the generalization may ef-

23 Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 132.

fectively enable more sophisticated and differentiated understandings of these relationships. That is to say, by giving expression to an overarching logic that structures or sets the parameters for American encounters with the past in general, discrete instances of such engagements—with the Holocaust, for example—can be related to larger and multiple contexts and thus be understood more fully. In such a way, the Americanization of the Holocaust, which thus far remains an inchoate and under-theorized concept, may gain more depth and coherence.

Fully aware of the risks involved, then, I presume it nonetheless useful to tentatively and heuristically postulate some very general directions, characteristics and manifestations of historical consciousness in the US. Hereby, I would like to base my speculations on the work of such excellent observers of the modern and postmodern "American way" as Alexis de Tocqueville and Jean Baudrillard respectively. Both these writers were drawn to the US because they were convinced that the country constituted something that was qualitatively different from Europe and indeed the rest of the world (through democracy in the case of Tocqueville and "radical modernity" in the case of Baudrillard). Indeed, both writers were each in their own way concerned precisely with unraveling the cultural DNA of America, and they each tried to pinpoint at what genes exactly American culture had mutated from its European parent culture. Consequently, I believe an excursus into these two writers' comments on America and its relation to the past is particularly instructive and expedient.

At the heart of Alexis de Tocqueville's monumental study *Democracy in America* lies the idea that equality of conditions, as found in democracies such as America, fully shape the country where this equality is found in all its man-made dimensions. As Tocqueville writes on the very first page of the introduction to his book, "as I studied American society, I increasingly viewed this equality of conditions as the factor which generated all the others and I discovered that it represented a central focus in which all of my observations constantly ended."[24] Indeed, to Tocqueville the very ways in which Americans view and experience reality, including the reality of history and the past, are determined by democracy and its underlying principles. Living in a country characterized by equality breeds individualism and self-reliance. Consequently, "in the civilized world there is no country less interested in philosophy than the United States," and yet, Americans "possess, without ever having gone to the trouble of defining the rules, a

24 Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America and Two Essays on America* (London: Penguin, 2003), 11. Hereafter cited in the text.

certain philosophic methodology common to all of them" (493). Indeed, Americans are anti-traditional and anti-theoretical, but very pragmatic. Philosophy, theory, aesthetics: these are the transcendental pursuits of the aristocracy. By contrast, Tocqueville suggests that "[e]quality encourages man to be his own judge of everything, giving him in all things, a taste for the tangible and concrete" (530). Americans, then, are naturally more inclined to the practical than to theory, and even in the arts, "the useful will have preference over the beautiful and it is best for the beautiful to be useful" (537). Moreover, as self-reliant individualists, who value practicality and usefulness over abstractions and aesthetics, Americans possess "a disdain for traditions and forms" (530), and "they entertain a naturally low regard for [philosophical and scientific meditations]" (532). In all of these examples, it is already possible to catch a glimpse of historical consciousness in America, since Americans' practicality, individualism, and impatience with tradition, form, and meditation also extends to contemplation of the past. As Tocqueville points out, "[a]ristocracy naturally leads the human mind to contemplate the past and fixes it there. Democracy, on the contrary, gives men a sort of instinctive distaste for all that is old" (560).

In democratic countries where the principle of equality holds sway, social stratification is much less rigid than in traditional, aristocratic countries. In a country like America, therefore, the story of the self-made man, the from-rags-to-riches motif, and the American Dream appear as individualist narratives of social achievement. These narratives are essentially future-oriented and effectively call upon Americans to finish with the past. Indeed, "[d]emocratic nations scarcely concern themselves with the past but readily dream of the future; in this direction, their unbounded imaginations spread and grow without limits. … Democracy, which shuts the past to poetry, opens up the future" (562). People in democracies tend toward individualism: given the opportunity by equality and liberty, they work hard in the present to create for themselves better futures; "[s]uch people," Tocqueville says, "owe nothing to anyone and, as it were, expect nothing from anyone" (589). However, in such a society, a thorough sense of incrementally accrued organic growth, a sense of history, is continually thwarted and undercut. Indeed, "[a]mid the continuous shifts which prevail in the heart of a democratic society, the bond which unites generations to each other becomes slack or breaks down; each person easily loses the trail of ideas coming from his forbears or hardly bothers himself about it" (494). In contrast to the old aristocracies, in democracies, people, families, and their fortunes come and go, without leaving many traces. In such a way, then, "[t]he thread of time is ever ruptured and the track of genera-

tions is blotted out. Those who have gone before are easily forgotten and those who follow are still completely unknown. Only those nearest to us are of any concern to us" (589). Indeed, Tocqueville concludes that "democracy [does not only] make men forget their ancestors but also hides their descendants and keeps them apart from their fellows. It constantly brings them back to themselves and threatens in the end to imprison them in the isolation of their own hearts" (589). In short, in American democracy, the past as well as the future are made subservient to the here and now.

Of course, Tocqueville's observations of Americans' attitudes to the past are part of an analysis of American democracy and culture that offers a highly stylized model of an early nineteenth century society. Like Tocqueville's analysis of American culture and democracy, these observations must clearly be read in light of their proper historical context. Moreover, by themselves they do not constitute a full theory of a distinctly American historical consciousness. Still, as Isaac Kramnick notes, "[t]he accuracy of its predictions is a much more important legacy of Tocqueville's text than its mistakes."[25] And therefore, just as Tocqueville's analysis of American democracy and culture is still considered highly significant today, so his views on Americans' relationship to the past do offer useful indications of the lines along which such an American historical consciousness might be theorized as a distinct structure of feeling.

Tocqueville rightly perceived the US as the paradigmatic democracy for having implemented this political system to a certain extent *ex nihilo*. But his foremost contribution is that he demonstrated how the US, as a result of its unprecedented political make-up, had developed a highly particular culture that in many ways, including its attitudes to the past, was fundamentally different than Europe's. Indeed, "[w]hat is remarkable," Tocqueville himself realizes, "is that two peoples, sprung so recently from the same stock, should feel and speak in ways so diametrically opposed" (711). It is precisely these fundamental cultural differences between Europe and America that fascinate Jean Baudrillard, a century and a half after Tocqueville.[26] In fact, Baudrillard perceives in America, which was "born of a rift with the Old World," a society where the human condition developed in

25 Isaac Kramnick, introduction to *Democracy in America*, by Alexis de Tocqueville, xxxvi.

26 In fact, Marco Diani has interestingly demonstrated how Baudrillard in his meditations on America in many ways takes his cues from Tocqueville. Marco Diani, "Baudrillard's Explorations of Tocqueville's America: Wandering in Hyperdemocracy," in *Issues in Travel Writing: Empire, Spectacle, and Displacement*, ed. Kristi Siegel (New York: Peter Lang, 2002): 123–134.

such distinct ways that it is well-nigh impossible for Americans and Europeans to truly understand each other.[27]

Written in a highly idiosyncratic, aphoristic, and often unashamedly hyperbolic style, Baudrillard's *America* openly flouts the norms and protocols of established sociological and historical method. Not surprisingly therefore, the work has exasperated many scholars and has in fact often been snortingly dismissed. And yet, even an overwhelmingly negative review of the book by Arthur J. Vidich is preceded by a quotation from Klaus Mann's 1940 introduction to Franz Kafka's *Amerika*: "[e]very detail of Kafka's description of American life is quite inaccurate, and yet the picture as a whole has a poetical truth."[28] Indeed, the attraction of Baudrillard's *America* is clearly not its adherence to the rules of rigid scholarship, but precisely its attempt to give expression to as yet not fully fathomed structures of feeling. That is to say, the book sheds light on dimensions of American life and culture that are generally not addressed by or amenable to more dispassionate scholarship, or that often actively resist its methods and categories.[29] It is on such an understanding, then, that I propose to read Baudrillard—not uncritically, but nonetheless eminently heuristically. That is to say, like Tocqueville, Baudrillard offers no ready-made theory of a distinctly American historical consciousness, yet his reflections and observations offer useful suggestions toward developing a more complex theoretical understanding of such a historical consciousness.

A key theorist of postmodernity, Baudrillard considers American culture as one that is held up by an endless procession of simulacra, or signs without referents. As such, "America is neither dream nor reality. It is a hyperreality. … Everything here is real and pragmatic, and yet it is all the stuff of dreams too" (28). Life in such a hyperreality effectuates a certain

27 Jean Baudrillard, *America* (London and New York: Verso, 1989), 10. Hereafter cited in the text.

28 Quoted in Arthur J. Vidich, "Baudrillard's *America*: Lost in the Ultimate Simulacrum," review of *America*, by Jean Baudrillard, *Theory Culture Society* 8, no. 2 (1991): 135, doi: 10.1177/026327691008002007.

29 Diani points out that in taking this approach, Baudrillard is obviously making himself vulnerable to critics demanding a more rigorous scholarly methodology (125). Yet he continues to argue that Baudrillard is only continuing a sensuous, symbolic, and lyrical strand in European writing about the US that was very much present in the celebrated and classic work of Tocqueville as well (126–127). The latter is only "relieved of [the same scrutiny that Baudrillard is subjected to] perhaps because he did not presume to bear the same methodological burden as Baudrillard. Though both pursued a vision of the future in America, Tocqueville went to America to examine a new social form, and Baudrillard went to experience a predetermined social theory." Diani, "Baudrillard's Explorations of Tocqueville's America," 127.

unidimensionality whereby the difference between reality and fiction (or film) seem to evaporate; "things, faces, skies, and deserts are expected to be simply what they are. This is the land of the 'just as it is'" (28). Thus, America is a deeply paradoxical country with violent contrasts "between the growing abstractness of a nuclear universe and a primary, visceral, unbounded vitality, springing not from rootedness, but from the lack of roots" (7). "Deep down," Baudrillard continues, "the US … is the *only remaining primitive society*. The fascinating thing is to travel through it as though it were the primitive society of the future, … yet lacking a past through which to reflect on this, and therefore fundamentally primitive" (7, italics in original).

Provocatively, Baudrillard suggests that in America there is no such thing as the past, or at least there is no inclination to reflect on it—that is, a historical consciousness. "America ducks the question of origins; it cultivates no origin or mythical authenticity; it has no past and no founding truth. Having known no primitive accumulation of time, it lives in a perpetual present. Having seen no slow, centuries-long accumulation of a principle of truth, it lives in perpetual simulation, in a perpetual present of signs" (76). In Baudrillardian America, everything that belongs to the past and survives today is automatically and by a kind of inescapable force sucked into the dynamic of the hyperreal. Irrevocably, the past thus becomes part of the perpetual present. Baudrillard witnesses this dynamic in Americans' "stubborn determination to reconstitute everything of a past and a history which were not their own and which they have largely destroyed or spirited away" (41). Much more than Europeans, Americans find everything worthy of putting in museums, thereby giving things a second life, which is somehow more interesting than the first: "they dream of baptizing everything a second time and only accord value to this later sacrament which is, as we know, a repeat performance of the first, but its repetition *as something more real*. And this indeed is the perfect definition of the simulacrum" (41, italics in original). Though Baudrillard's writing is characteristically postmodern, his observations concerning America's relationship to the past are in fact very close to those of Tocqueville's. What is perhaps more interesting is the way in which Baudrillard explains America's (putative) lack of historical consciousness.

Whereas Tocqueville seeks to explain the fundamental cultural differences between Europe and America in terms of democracy and aristocracy, Baudrillard addresses them from the even more universal perspective of modernity. According to Baudrillard, "[t]he confrontation between America and Europe reveals not so much a *rapprochement* as a distortion,

an unbridgeable rift. There isn't just a gap between us, but a whole chasm of modernity" (73). Whereas America was born modern, Europe has never fully become so even today. In what is a crucial point, Baudrillard suggests that America "is a utopia which has behaved from the very beginning as though it were already achieved" (28). Since the end of the eighteenth century, Europe experienced revolutions and the rise of ideology, whereas "the Americans kept intact—preserved as it was by a breadth of ocean that created something akin to temporal insularity—the utopian and moral perspective of the men of the eighteenth century, or even of the Puritan sects of the seventeenth, transplanted and kept alive, safely sheltered from the vicissitudes of history" (90). It is this perspective on the world that forms the American "primal scene," whereas in Europe, "[p]olitics and history … remain our primal scene" (76). In the nineteenth century, Europe developed historical thinking whereas the Americans, living in utopia achieved, had no need for this. "The concept of history as the transcending of a social and political rationality, as a dialectical, conflictual vision of societies, is not theirs, just as modernity, conceived precisely as an original break with a certain history, will never be ours" (80).[30] Again, this results in a profoundly different perspective on reality and on the past. When utopian ideas of an ideal society are transplanted across the ocean and take on concrete reality, Baudrillard explains, "a world-scale *coup de théâtre*" takes place that is a bit like science fiction and is "irreversible" (78). Indeed, Baudrillard writes,

> [t]his is what separates us, come what may, from the Americans. We shall never catch them up. … We do not have either the spirit or the audacity for what might be called the zero degree of culture, the power of unculture. It is no good our trying more or less to adapt, their vision of the world will always be beyond our grasp, just as the transcendental, historical *Weltanschauung* of Europe will always be beyond the Americans. … There are some gaps that are definitive and cannot be bridged. (78)

30 Of course, here (and elsewhere in Baudrillard's *America*) is a notion of modernity that one might take issue with. Historical consciousness is commonly seen as a fundamentally *modern* characteristic: being modern presupposes precisely that one is aware of not being ancient. However, in the context of this passage, Baudrillard conceives of modernity as a free-floating moment where the ties with history are fully cut. It seems in fact that in such a case the concept of *post*modernity would be more fitting. But then again, can we plausibly stretch the concept of postmodernity to have its origins in eighteenth century America? Baudrillard's claim that America is the original version of modernity and that Europe never fully achieved this is a wonderful and intriguing rhetorical flourish, but it is difficult to maintain it from a wider cultural and historical perspective.

Obviously, the pictures Tocqueville and Baudrillard paint of Americans' relationship to the past make use of greatly exaggerated, absolutist, and stereotypical categories. Baudrillard especially provokes strong feelings of disagreement among historians who, rightly, value methodical, source-based historiographical inquiry. However, what is significant about these thinkers' bold and resounding claims is not that they are (in)correct and can be (dis)proven, but that they can meaningfully direct our thinking. Clearly, one will be hard-pressed to find in pure and undiluted form either the American "savage modern" or the European, historically conscious, *Kultur*-bearing, living anachronism. Indeed, to suggest that there is a single and coherent European historical consciousness is as reductive as to say that there is one in the US. Yet the point of such generalizations is to emphasize that there *are* in fact significant differences in the ways in which the past is made sense of on both sides of the Atlantic, as well as *within* Europe and the US. In order to understand these processes of relating to the past, therefore, one must in fact differentiate and take into account this diversity and variation. Thus, Baudrillard boldly writes of America that "[t]here is no culture here, no cultural discourse" (100). Far from this being a dismissal, however, Baudrillard continues by arguing that "[i]f it is the lack of culture that is original, then it is the lack of culture one should embrace" (101). In accordance with Tocqueville, who warned Europeans of blindly judging America by their own standards, Baudrillard points out that "[i]f you simply remain fixated on the familiar canon of high culture, you miss the essential point (which is, precisely, the inessential)" (101). Indeed, what we must do is face the consequences of interpretation and try to understand America and its historical consciousness on its own terms.

From the radical perspective of Baudrillard, America has no historical consciousness. As Rob Kroes notes, it is in fact a common conceit among European intellectuals "to evoke the image of a nation that lacks the European sense of history, that is without memory, cut adrift from the passage of time, bobbing along with shifting tides and currents."[31] I do not think it advisable to follow the tradition to such lengths, but Baudrillard and Tocqueville's analyses do suggest that historical consciousness in America functions in fundamentally *different* ways than that the critical or dialectical historical consciousness supposedly operating in Europe. Freely basing myself on these authors, therefore, I suggest that five closely related characteristics can be attributed to (the dominant, or hegemonic, form of)

31 Rob Kroes, *If You've Seen One, You've Seen the Mall: Europeans and American Mass Culture* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1996), 31.

historical consciousness in America, whereby the first two are derived from Tocqueville and the latter three from Baudrillard:

1. American culture and historical consciousness are essentially democratic and of "the people." Consequently, Americans tend to favor practicality and usefulness over theory, combined even with a certain disdain for forms and traditions. Moreover, *popular* culture plays a key role in mediating Americans' relationship to the past.

2. Because individualism is a central dimension of the American character, historical consciousness in the US is forward-looking, progressive, and regenerative. Historical consciousness in the US is less interested in the past *per se* than in individuals' possibilities in the future. Americans do not want to know or retrieve the past for its own sake; they are interested in the past only in as far as it is significant to their own lives, presently or in the future.

3. American historical consciousness has a tendency to elide dialectics and the distinction between past and present; instead, it functions in a perpetual present. As such, paradoxically, historical consciousness in the US is marked by what Jean Baudrillard calls a certain "primitivism," because it short-circuits (meta)reflection.

4. Historical consciousness in the US is modern, not ancient, in the sense that it deliberately cuts all connections with the cumbersome claims of the past.

5. American historical consciousness is situated in a Utopia Achieved, a fiction that has become real, whereas Europe always remains non-fiction, subject to cruel History.

In addition to these characteristics, consumer capitalism, as the dominant socio-economic force in American life, intensifies the dynamics and effects of historical consciousness in America. Saul Friedlander, for instance, argues that among several factors, "the one belonging specifically to contemporary historical consciousness is the commercial one. The 'culture industry' … creates an immense reservoir of representations of the past. … This reservoir is becoming increasingly decisive in moulding the vision of the past of the great majority of Western societies."[32] But in fact, it is es-

32 Friedlander, "The End of Innovation?," 31.

pecially in neo-Marxist cultural theory that a consistent argument may be found about the ways in which consumer capitalism, often mentioned in one breath with postmodernism, affects understandings of history.[33]

As scholars like Fredric Jameson, Guy Debord, and indeed Jean Baudrillard in various ways suggest, it is one of the most significant effects of consumer capitalism to erode and ultimately destroy a critical or dialectical understanding of history. Their argument can be explained by briefly considering the neo-Marxist analysis of consumerism itself. Consumerism developed in the period after World War II when production had advanced to such a level that most basic survival needs had been met and society had reached a certain level of minimal affluence. In order to stay in place in this new context, capitalism, which long had relied on the resources of the few, sought to broach and incorporate these new and wide-spread sources of wealth. Consequently, it changed from a system that found its *raison d'être* in the continual expansion of production (owned by the few) to one that fosters the continual expenditure of surplus value (spent by the many). The purpose of such an economy is geared no longer to satisfy immediate survival needs, but instead to supply an endless series of commodities and images in response to an insatiable desire to spend and consume. Thus, consumption brings into being a self-contained, self-perpetuating system where a modernist or dialectical sense of history necessarily disappears, as "[t]he managed *possession* of consumer goods and objects is individualizing, atomizing, and de-historicizing."[34] That is to say, in their relentless quest to consume, consumers fetishize commodities and in the process lose sight of—become alienated from—reality itself as a complex social and historical process. In this context, history and the historical sense, or, the complex awareness of precisely this complex process, atrophy. As Fredric Jameson suggests, "[w]hat was once, in the historical novel as Lukács defines it, the organic genealogy of the bourgeois collective project," in the new consumerist configuration "[becomes] a vast collection of images, a multitudinous photographic simulacrum. … [T]he past as 'referent' finds itself gradually bracketed, and then effaced altogether, leaving us with

33 Fredric Jameson for instance famously refers to postmodernism (which for him is synonymous with "the logic of late capitalism") as a term that "[attempts] to think the present historically in an age that has forgotten how to think historically." For him, the "loss of historicity" is "the one uniquely privileged symptom" of postmodernism, and he indeed takes it "as axiomatic that 'modernist history' is the first casualty and mysterious absence of the postmodernism period [*sic*]." Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or The Logic of Late Capitalism* (London and New York: Verso, 1991), ix, x, xi.

34 Jean Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures* (London, Thousand Oaks, and New Delhi: Sage, 1998), 85. Italics in original.

nothing but texts" (18).[35] All of this does not exactly mean that memory, history, or any sense of the past disappear *in toto*; rather, under the wellnigh inescapable influence of consumerism, *history and memory are themselves turned into commodities*.

Of course, from the neo-Marxist point of view, the elision of dialectical historical consciousness in consumer capitalism is cause for great concern because it would destroy the very conditions of political agency and change. Beyond the question of whether that concern is justified or not, the neo-Marxist analysis of consumer capitalism does appear helpful in understanding how consumerism seems to reinforce many of the elements already present in American historical consciousness. For instance, consumerism reinforces the tendency to engage with history through popular and mass culture. Also, consumerism thrives in an individualistic society, and at the same time reinforces it. Moreover, it seems reasonable to suggest that consumerism exacerbates the drive in American historical consciousness toward the elision of dialectics and stimulates the maintaining of a perpetual present. Indeed, in a consumer society, the ongoing consumption of an endless procession of images becomes the engine of society, not history.

Clearly, my five propositions concerning American historical consciousness represent no tried and tested sociological or historical axioms, but generalizations or theoretical constructs based on the work of highly perceptive observers of "the American way." As such, they offer a useful significatory framework for understanding American engagements with the past and their scholarly value must therefore be located not in their empirical grounding but, as I cannot emphasize enough, in their heuristic application. What is significant, however, is that, notwithstanding their heuristic nature, these postulates about American historical consciousness nonetheless resonate strongly with more rigidly historiographical scholarship as well. For instance, in his celebrated study *The Past is a Foreign Country*, David Lowenthal describes how Americans since the earliest days of the nation have seen themselves as the people of eternal youth and

35 In a similar vein, Guy Debord famously writes that "[i]n societies where modern conditions of production prevail, all of life presents itself as an immense accumulation of *spectacles*. Everything that was directly lived has moved away into a representation." For Debord, history is one of the central human achievements that falls prey to the society of the spectacle and disappears into "mere" representation: "[t]he spectacle, as the present social organization of the paralysis of history and memory, of the abandonment of history built on the foundation of historical time, is the *false consciousness of time*." Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle* (Detroit: Black and Red, 2010), par. 1, par. 158.

have tried to cut themselves off from history. "Not until the end of the nineteenth century," according to Lowenthal, "was confidence in dispensation from history seriously challenged, and well into the twentieth century … Americans conceived themselves as uniquely exempt from secular historical processes.[36]

Even more to the point, Dorothy Ross analyzes historical consciousness in nineteenth-century America in the period before European historicism (belatedly) started to affect American historiography. Indeed, when roughly since the French Revolution European intellectuals started to embrace the tenets of historicism, America did not follow suit. Ross explains this by saying that the "success of the Revolution and the establishment of republican government in the Constitution were largely understood in America as events in Christian and republican time."[37] Americans felt that their country

> represented a radical break in history and a radical breakthrough of God's time into secular history. The country's progress would be the unfolding of the millennial seed, rather than a process of historical change. … Unlike the nations of the past, America would never grow old. American republicans turned Adam Smith's historicist view of progress into the vision of a society that, even while progressing, could escape historical change. (912)

According to Ross, this anti-historicist, millennial historical consciousness proved "remarkably resilient" throughout the nineteenth century (912). Though European historicism finally did start changing the American historical profession, according to Ross it was never fully accepted, and she concludes her article with the claim that "twentieth-century Americans who appreciated the relativistic implications of historicism acted like their eighteenth- and nineteenth-century forebears and quickly sought escape from history" (928). In other words, even though historicism entered and altered professional history in America, it has not fully replaced the pre-historicist historical consciousness that developed in post-revolutionary America. Even today, the legacies of millenarian thinking live on in contemporary American historical consciousness and they are still visibly present in today's instances of cultural memory—albeit mediated in new and contemporary ways. American Holocaust memory offers a prime example.

36 David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 109.

37 Dorothy Ross, "Historical Consciousness in Nineteenth-Century America," *The American Historical Review* 89, no. 4 (October 1984): 911–12, doi: 10.2307/1866398. Hereafter cited in the text.

The Holocaust and American Historical Consciousness

The Americanization of the Holocaust, I suggest, must be seen as a process that functions according to the logic of a distinct, American historical consciousness. And from such a perspective, it is possible to succinctly identify five aspects of this phenomenon that loosely correspond with the five characteristics of American historical consciousness pointed out above:

1. American culture has relatively few aesthetical qualms about the limits of representation. The Holocaust is most prominently addressed in easily consumable formats such as popular fiction and film, or the quintessential forms of American popular and mass culture more generally. No matter how often the famous Adorno dictum that there can be no poetry after Auschwitz is adduced, what is in fact most significant about American culture's engagement with the Holocaust is that, since the 1950s, it has blithely and relentlessly represented the Holocaust in popular formats. In this respect, one only has to think of the (many) stage and screen adaptations of Anne Frank's diary, the popular novels of Leon Uris, William Styron, and, recently, Jenna Blum, or Holocaust-related television shows like NBC's miniseries *Holocaust*, as well as Hollywood mega-productions such as *Schindler's List*. This ongoing effort to represent the Holocaust in popular forms does not simply stem from callousness, but rather from American culture's innate impatience with theoretical and aesthetical precepts and imperatives. As a paradigmatically democratic culture, it favors more practical forms of imaginative and artistic expression; a literature and art of the people, indeed a *popular* culture. "[H]owever persuasively we may posit the Holocaust as a paradigm-shattering tragedy," Alan Mintz notes,

   > it is not in the conservative nature of cultures to be easily shattered and reconfigured. It is far more typical for cultures to resist admitting the Holocaust precisely because of this subversive quality; and when the Holocaust is finally let in, … it enters not on its own terms, scorching earth and blazing new ground, but within the terms already set out from within the culture's own dynamic.[38]

2. American culture is interested particularly in uplifting stories of defiance, survival, and regeneration. This can be seen most clearly in the happy endings and future-oriented conclusions that mark so many

38 Mintz, *Popular Culture*, 36–37.

American representations of the Holocaust. This is precisely what Alvin Rosenfeld describes in a passage quoted at the beginning of this chapter as "the American tendency to downplay or deny the dark and brutal sides of life and to place a preponderant emphasis on the saving power of individual moral conduct and collective deeds of redemption."[39] But Rosenfeld, a trained literary critic and aesthete, refuses or is unable to empathize with the American public at large as well as its value system. Part of an individualistic, forward-looking culture, Americans overwhelmingly choose to relate to the horrors of the Holocaust in ways that affirm new possibilities in the future. A less cathartic approach that focuses more on understanding the well-nigh unfathomable depths of suffering is alien to the American experience and therefore a lot less appealing. Such a perspective may be valued more by the community of scholars, but that is also precisely the point: such an approach is not inherently more correct or more sincere than an Americanized, forward-looking view. Rather, it answers to the particular perspective of scholars by meeting very specific and much less widely held professional demands.

But even though American culture valorizes uplifting stories about the Holocaust, this does not mean that the historical record as such is necessarily disregarded. American culture is not so much *dis*interested in history; rather, as an individualistic culture, it is interested in the past less for its own sake than for the uses it may serve and the meanings it may have in present day American reality. Hence, it stages a universalization of the Holocaust that allows an ever increasingly broad range of American comparisons and identifications. Consequently, the Holocaust is mobilized and its meanings expanded to inform a huge variety of concerns. The Holocaust is invoked in relation to the (genocidal) fate of Native Americans, the history of American slavery, as well as a broad range of other histories of oppression and genocide, but it is also referred to in discussions of contemporary Jewish identity, and in heated debates about abortion, euthanasia, and tax policy. Many of these comparisons can be meaningful and insightful, which is not to deny that others may be questionable, insensitive, and sometimes reprehensible. However, the point is that in a democratic society, the meaning of history is essentially open to debate—a debate in which *anyone*, including non-professionals, may participate and the value of one view over the other is determined not by force but by reason.

39 Rosenfeld, "The Americanization of the Holocaust," 37.

3. Unperturbed by the concern that past occurrences are of a singular nature and therefore forever out of reach, Americans are interested in trying to find out what the Holocaust was "really like" by immersing themselves in a ceaseless procession of images. Due to ever-developing technological advancements, the distinction between images and reality becomes ever more indistinct and ever more irrelevant: American popular culture often stages spectacular and immersive experiences that *simulate* truthful and realistic Holocaust experiences. Americans look for these experiences in hyperrealistic novels, films, and TV programs, and increasingly in (experiential) museums, in Holocaust tourism, and in "living history" projects (for example, class room role-playing). These encounters are technologically advanced but experientially "primitive": by eliding the dialectic between past and present and preempting meta-reflection, they *seemingly* bridge the distance between contemporary American reality and the reality of the Holocaust.

4. Americans' approach to the Holocaust is patently (post)modern, which is to say that the meaning of the Holocaust inheres not in the brute facts themselves, but in the ways they are constructed and reconstructed according to the requirements of the present. Indeed, in the US, it is less the claims of history than those of the market and the town hall that shape Holocaust memorialization. That is to say, commercialization and ideology trump historicization. The significance and success of Holocaust films, for instance, are measured in terms of audience, sales, and profits, as well as by the political or moral lessons they inspire; but not primarily by historical accuracy. Indeed, the reason that the Holocaust has become such a central dimension of American life is not primarily its historical significance. Rather, the "success" of the Holocaust in American life can be explained by the fact that, on the one hand, this memory generates money, and, on the other, that it has proven capable of teaching American values by showing what is most un-American.

   The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, for instance, "defines what it means to be American by graphically illustrating what it means not to be American," as James Young suggests. "In effect, being placed on the Mall," Young continues, "the museum will enshrine not just the history of the Holocaust, but American ideals as they counterpoint the Holocaust. By remembering the crimes of another people in another land, Americans will recall their

nation's own idealized reason for being."[40] Moreover, it is undeniable that remembering the Holocaust in the US has not escaped the logic of late capitalism, as Fredric Jameson might say. The Holocaust clearly is subjected to commodification, marketing, and consumerism. As part of Oprah's Book Club, Elie Wiesel's *Night* has become a great gift, and a visit to the Holocaust Museum in Washington is a day out: the museum staff wish you to "enjoy your visit."[41] But despite the many horror stories about the "Holocaust industry" and "Shoah business," this capitalist logic is not in itself a cause for concern, as there are very few things in (American) life that do escape this capitalist logic of commodification and reification. In fact, there is nothing *inherently* perverse about any of these developments—commercial or ideological. It only means that, like so many other forms of human behavior and other forms of remembering the past, "the remembrance of the Holocaust in America is wrapped around a changing mix of ulterior motives," as Alan Mintz points out.[42]

5. Because America is a Utopia Achieved, resulting in a structure of feeling that is essentially a-historical, a dialectical understanding of "History" is profoundly alien to Americans. Thus, Americans remain cut off from what scholars (or Europeans) might call "real history," experiencing and consuming only simulacral representations of it. For their knowledge of the Holocaust, Americans rely almost fully on what Guy Debord refers to as spectacles. Except for a handful of survivors and veterans whose ranks are swiftly diminishing, there is no living memory of the Holocaustal past and there are no physical witnesses of destruction—no "former Jewish neighborhoods," no concentration camps, no "guilty landscapes." All there is are books, TV shows, movies, museums, memorials, and monuments: they are the only media that offer access to the past, but that access is essentially fictional, simulated, and spectacular.

These five characteristics of American Holocaust memory have been identified in one form or another by many authors and seem to cover the range of themes associated with the Americanization of the Holocaust fairly

40 James E. Young, *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993), 337.

41 In a documentary by Dutch filmmaker Oeke Hoogendijk, a USHMM staff member can clearly be heard wishing visitors to enjoy their visit as she directs them into the elevator taking them to the start of the exhibition. Oeke Hoogendijk, *De Verbeelding van de Holocaust*, Nederland 1, IKON Documentaire, aired September 18, 2003, DVD.

42 Mintz, *Popular Culture*, 159.

well.[43] Generally, they have been the subject of severe criticism. However, when held in the light of the five characteristics of American historical consciousness pointed out above, which in turn represents one form of historical consciousness alongside others, it becomes clear that the Americanization of the Holocaust cannot simply be dismissed as a threat to historical understanding. Instead, it represents a much more complex process that answers to a distinctly American cultural logic.

One significant contribution to understanding this complexity has been made by memory scholars such as Levy and Sznaider, who have emphasized the social and political dynamics in which history is mediated in culture. These scholars have convincingly demonstrated that as a result of more than half a century of American military, political, and cultural hegemony, the Americanization of the Holocaust has become an increasingly international and global affair: characteristically American ways of representing the past have found fertile ground all around the world, sometimes eclipsing more scholarly approaches. However, even though the Americanization of the Holocaust has to a considerable extent come to coincide with the logic of globalization and international capitalism, it does not equate with them. The Americanization of the Holocaust may signal this history's popularization, commodification, universalization, and decontextualization in an increasingly global context. But it is important to emphasize that these processes nonetheless represent a particular perspective (or collection of perspectives) on the Holocaust derived from a very specific, culturally and historically contingent relationship to the past that is uniquely American. "Memory is never shaped in a vacuum," James Young writes.[44] Indeed, unless we take into detailed account the very particular perspectives on and relationships to the past and to the Holocaust that inform American (and other) representations of this history, we are

43 There is indeed an abundance of literature on the topic of how American culture has staged encounters with the Holocaust. Most of this writing is eminently critical of these engagements with the past. Some notable examples in addition to the texts already referred to in this chapter are Alvin H. Rosenfeld, "The Americanization of the Holocaust," chap. 3 in *The End of the Holocaust* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2011); Elie Wiesel, "Art and the Holocaust: Trivializing Memory," *The New York Times*, 11 June 1989, http://www.nytimes.com/1989/06/11/movies/art-and-the-holocaust-trivializing-memory.html?pagewanted=all&src=pm; Lawrence Langer, "The Americanization of the Holocaust on Stage and Screen," in *Admitting the Holocaust: Collected Essays* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 157–177; Claude Lanzmann, "From Holocaust to 'Holocaust,'" in *Claude Lanzmann's* Shoah*: Key Essays*, ed. Stuart Liebman (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 27–36.

44 Young, *The Texture of Memory*, 2.

bound to misunderstand them. And in doing so, we will continue to underestimate the complexity of contemporary culture's engagements with and relation to the Holocaust. To avoid this, as Alan Mintz rightly suggests, "one conclusion will be inescapable: that the career of the Holocaust in America is an American story."[45] That is to say, rather than judging to what extent American representations of the Holocaust (fail to) live up to a normative conception of the Holocaust "as it really was," the challenge becomes to study such American engagements *on their own terms*.

Such a profoundly America-centered perspective radically alters the violent nature of the discussions in which the Americanization of the Holocaust has tended to be embroiled. As Mintz notes, this is to turn the object of study into

> the scene of an endlessly fascinating intellectual drama whose subject is admittedly less the Holocaust than American culture. At the center of the drama is the spectacle of a formidable cultural system struggling with a tragic event alien to its nature and proceeding through stages of denial to an accommodation with the event on its own terms.[46]

The point, then, is not so much to consider Americanized engagements with the Holocaust as (failed) historical representations, but rather as American cultural expressions. Such an approach leaves one in a much better position to fathom the very complexity of American engagements with the Holocaust. Of course, this is not to say that it is no longer possible to be critical of the Americanization of the Holocaust. On the contrary, as Mintz points out, "[h]ere, too, there is room for judgment—though not endemic outrage—and for aesthetic discriminations" (82). In fact, questions must be asked about the morality and possible dangers of this process, especially when commercialization, commodification, consumerism, and ideology seem to play such decisive parts in it, which, in turn, seems to go at the cost of historical reflection. However, what is important is that historical reflection can no longer be taken as the only privileged discourse on the past. Rather, different discourses on the past seem to fulfill different needs and requirements, answering to different relationships to and perspectives on the Holocaust.

The study of popular culture offers one of the arenas in which these and related matters can be addressed most fruitfully, as popular and mass culture are the contexts in which the Americanization of the Holocaust can

45 Mintz, *Popular Culture*, xi.
46 Ibid., 82. Hereafter cited in the text.

be witnessed in its most essential forms. Interestingly, some of the more recent and thoughtful scholarship on the Holocaust in popular culture is now suggesting that popular and mass culture does not so much necessarily trivialize, sugar-coat, or universalize the Holocaust, but rather that it "can teach ethical thinking … and thereby reconfigure a person's worldview," as Alison Landsberg suggests.[47] In a similar vein, Daniel Levy and Natan Sznaider suggest that "[i]t is precisely these mass products that can stir up emotion and that can make the general public sympathize with the suffering of others."[48] By inspiring empathic identification rather than historical distancing, the Americanization of the Holocaust in fact represents a fundamentally different way of historicizing the Holocaust. Therefore,

47 Alison Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 138. Landsberg's central idea is that modern technology and media have led to the development of "a new form of memory, which I call *prosthetic memory*" (2, italics in original). Landsberg suggests this new form of memory "emerges at the interface between a person and a historical narrative about the past, at an experiential site such as a movie theater or museum" (2). Through technologically advanced and therefore immersive experiences, "prosthetic memory creates the conditions for ethical thinking precisely by encouraging people to feel connected to, while recognizing the alterity of, the 'other'" (9). This sense of "connectedness" is fostered in particular by popular and mass culture's investment in "the experiential" as a mode of knowledge. That is to say, in contrast with cognitive knowledge, which is developed through study and education, contemporary forms of popular and mass culture enable the formation of experiential knowledge by activating humans' emotive and affective sensibilities. In fact, Landsberg suggests that this has become a highly significant trend in contemporary American popular and mass culture, which has also become increasingly capable of it through recent technological advances. She explains: "the mass media have begun to construct sites—what I term *transferential spaces*—in which people are invited to enter into experiential relationships to events through which they themselves did not live" (113, italics in original). Immersive films like Spielberg's *Schindler's List* and high-tech museums like the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington are such transferential spaces where visitors come to learn about the Holocaust through experience. However, "[t]his is not to say that visitors somehow experience the Holocaust. Rather, they have an experience that positions their bodies to be better able to understand an otherwise unthinkable event" (131); or, to qualify this a little, the experience gives them this *impression*. Landsberg argues that contemporary products of mass culture perform processes of mimesis, but this mimesis—through dead objects in a museum, or moving images on the screen—creates "not an experience of presence but an experience of profound absence" (135). And through such mimesis of absence, through the perceived presence of an absence, mass culture allows viewers to experience not full identification and sympathy, but rather empathy. This empathy allows people with no clear-cut biographical relation to the Holocaust's victims to emotively connect to these victims without losing track of their own historical rootedness.

48 Levy and Sznaider, *The Holocaust and Memory in the Global Age*, 135.

against those who dismiss the Americanization of the Holocaust for being superficial, etcetera, Levy and Sznaider respond that "this is not the only way to look at it. The other way—modern, Protestant, individualized (Americanized) way to look at it—is in one-to-one relation to the question: 'What does the Holocaust do to me?'"[49] And indeed, it seems that to "ordinary" individuals, it is precisely popular and mass culture's Americanized representations of the Holocaust that offer the most affecting and therefore the most effective answers to this question.

In an intriguing way, then, the Americanization of the Holocaust and the ways in which it promotes ethical thinking by means of popular and mass culture brings us back to Baudrillard's idea that America's primal scene is that of the moral and utopian, whereas in Europe it is history and politics. Archetypically, the European, modernist intellectual will judge a representation of the Holocaust in terms of its historical accuracy and its aesthetical merits; by contrast, the archetypal American, postmodern individualist is much more concerned with the ultimately moral question of "what does it mean to me?"[50] Precisely by distinguishing a specifically American form of historical consciousness, it becomes possible to conceive of the Americanization of the Holocaust as a process that stimulates

49 Ibid., 139.

50 On a more general level, this idea also resonates powerfully with Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen, *The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998). Motivated in part by a growing chorus lamenting the supposedly appalling state of historical awareness in America, the authors wanted to find out on the basis of empirical data how "ordinary" Americans *actually* relate to the past. After conducting a large survey, Rosenzweig and Thelen found out that "people pursue the past actively and make it part of everyday life"; the authors are in fact impressed with "the *presence* of the past—its ubiquity and its connection to current-day concerns—rather than its frequently bemoaned absence" (18, italics in original). However, they also found that people generally relate to the past in different ways than professional historians expect. People do not seem to care much about "History," but rather about narratives of the past that touch them in a personal way. The past that tends to be most meaningful to them is not "historical events" but rather past *experience*. It is mostly as remembered experience that people use the past "in order to build and sustain relationships, to question and discover identity, and to create and pass on legacies of their own choosing" (39). In other words, people use the past by personalizing it, which is to say that the past is employed as a means of forging identities and connecting with other people—mostly family members past, present, even future. Moreover, in his personal "afterthoughts," Roy Rosenzweig notes how people often emphasize that they consider the past "as a source for moral guidance" (184). This may be an important cause of the gap between professional history and popular history, because "our professional training often teaches us to shun rather than embrace the moral and personal questions that seemed so important to respondents" (185).

empathic identification rather than historical distancing. Hereby, the past emerges as the subject of individualized *moral* reflection before distanced *historical* reflection. To say that this merely trivializes history is also a way of misunderstanding at a fundamental level the nature of American historical consciousness. The challenge, then, is not in dismissing the Americanization of the Holocaust for the historical or aesthetic understandings it fails to achieve, but rather in penetrating the inevitably American interpretations it does produce—for better or for worse.

3

The Dynamic of Distance

The Memory of the Holocaust in Contemporary Jewish American Fiction

In his short story "The Tumblers," Nathan Englander spins a tale about the fabled Fools of Chelm of Yiddish folklore. This particular Chelm story, however, does not take place in a long since gone era of mythical memory, but in a very distinct historical period: the Holocaust. When the order comes for the Jews of Chelm to be deported by train, the ultra-Orthodox followers of the Mahmir Rebbe accidentally board not the train taking them to a concentration camp, but one for circus artists employed by the Germans. On board the train, the Fools hear of "unmatched feats of magic being performed with the trains. They go away full … and come back empty, as if never before used."[1] What happens with the Jews on those trains can only be understood as "[s]leight of hand" and "classic illusion" (40): "[f]irst they are here, and then they are gone. … For a moment a magician stands, a field of Jews at his feet, then nothing. … The train sits empty. The magician stands alone on the platform. Nothing remains but the traditional puff of smoke. This trick he performs, puff after puff, twenty-four hours a day" (40). True to tradition, the Fools do not question this awful, yet seemingly unbelievable story for a moment, and by their very own tried and tested logic, they decide to save themselves by becoming circus artists as well. At the end of the story, they perform their "tumbling act" for a gathering of Nazis, who love them for being "as clumsy as Jews" (54). And so, for the Fools, "there were no snipers, as there are for hands that reach out of ghettos; no dogs, as for hands that reach out from the cracks in boxcar floors; no angels waiting, as they always do, for hands that reach out from chimneys into ash-clouded skies" (55). As in the traditional Chelm tales, all ends well—if only on the surface.

1 Nathan Englander, "The Tumblers," in *For the Relief of Unbearable Urges* (London: Faber and Faber, 2000), 39. Hereafter cited in the text.

There is something absolutely delightful about Englander's latter-day Chelm story as well as something deeply painful. The story's rendering of atmosphere, plot, character, and dialogue resonates strongly with the folkloric tradition Englander is emulating and is perfectly comic; yet its inevitable Holocaust subtext, strengthened by the at times elegiac narrative voice, gives the story a twist that is intensely tragic as well as seemingly incongruous and uncomfortable. Indeed, Englander and his Fools seem to fit only very poorly within the canon of authors and a collection of images, themes, and narrative structures that readers have come to associate with the Holocaust. This raises the issue of how to critically approach a Holocaust story like Englander's; in fact, the issue is all the more important because Englander's story is representative of a broader trend in recent Jewish American literature to approach the Holocaust in unusual and seemingly impious ways. However, what may be called the classical tradition of Holocaust literary scholarship offers few tools for coming to grips with Englander's story and this recent writing more generally.

Since the 1970s especially, thinking about the Holocaust has been shaped by an exceptionalist perspective that stressed that the Holocaust defies and exceeds existing categories of thought and experience. Within this view, the very acts of thinking, speaking, and writing about the Holocaust became themselves fraught with immense, almost insuperable problems. Particularly the issue of the "limits of representation" posed an important scholarly and historiographical problem, but it was perhaps even more urgently felt in the realm of literature and aesthetics, where the moral as well as epistemological dimensions of the problem present themselves in the most acutely palpable ways.

As Lawrence Langer notes in *The Holocaust and the Literary Imagination*, "[t]here is something disagreeable, almost dishonorable, in the conversion of the suffering of the victims into works of art."[2] The suggestion here seems to be that Holocaust art is suspect because art is something pleasurable that is there to enjoy—yet how can one possibly "enjoy" the Holocaust?[3] If this is primarily a moral and aesthetical issue, then there is also

2 Lawrence L. Langer, *The Holocaust and the Literary Imagination* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1975), 1. Hereafter cited in the text.

3 If this is indeed Langer's suggestion, there is something odd about it from the point of view of eighteenth and nineteenth century aesthetics. If the Holocaust is indeed ineffable, unspeakable, and unthinkable, it seems very much allied to what the Romantics referred to as the sublime. In a famous 1757 treatise, Edmund Burke wrote that "[w]hatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the *sublime*" (110, italics in orig-

the more strictly epistemological concern of whether artistic language is actually capable of expressing the events of the Holocaust. After all, Langer suggests, "where the Holocaust was concerned, reality often exceeded the power of the imagination to conjure up images commensurate with the experience the artist wished to record, with the result that the writer was confronted with the dilemma of converting into literature a history too terrible to imagine" (284). The result of these complications, as seen by Langer and many others, is that Holocaust literature is always constricted by a double bind: when writers, confronted by the Holocaust, feel called upon to respond to this reality by means of literature, they are dealing with a reality that *should not* and ultimately *cannot* be represented—a reality that always remains beyond their grasp. More profoundly even, the reality of the Holocaust may be so horrendous that precisely the mode of artistic expression itself is called into question: precisely the medium of art may be inadequate to the task of representing the Holocaust.

These complications would actually seem to preclude Holocaust literature and art, which is indeed a position that has been taken by Elie Wiesel. For Wiesel, the very thought of a literature about the Holocaust is offensive: "[a] novel about Treblinka is either not a novel or not about Treblinka. A novel about Majdanek is about blasphemy. *Is* blasphemy."[4] Many literary scholars have indeed shared the exceptionalist perspective of survivors like Wiesel, but they have tended to steer a slightly more pragmatic

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inal). And for the Romantics, the sublime poses not so much an aesthetic or artistic problem, but rather a *challenge*. Indeed, according to them, it is art among all human inventions that is uniquely capable of evoking the sublime—though never directly, but always at a certain distance. This indirectness and distance is important, because if art would evoke the terror of the sublime directly, it would be unbearable. However, "at certain distances, and with certain modifications, [danger or pain] may be, and they are, delightful, as we every day experience," Burke writes (111). What is significant, moreover, is that any sense of "delight" that sublime art may evoke for Burke is not the same as "ordinary" pleasure. Stemming from pain, it is in fact much more powerful (110–111; 125). In other words, it seems that from a Burkean perspective, there is *nothing* "disagreeable" or "dishonorable" about "the conversion of the suffering of the victims into works of art" (Langer). To the contrary, art and literature are uniquely disposed to address this suffering. See also note 14. Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful with an Introductory Discourse Concerning Taste, and Several Other Additions*, in *The Works of the Right Honourable Edmund Burke*, vol. 1 (London: John Nimmo, 1887; Project Gutenberg, 2003), http://www.gutenberg.org/files/15043/15043-h/15043-h.htm.

4 Elie Wiesel, "The Holocaust as Literary Inspiration," in *Dimensions of the Holocaust: Lectures at Northwestern University*, ed. Elie Wiesel, Lucy S. Dawidowicz, Dorothy Rabinowitz, and Robert McAfee Brown (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University, 1977), 7.

course: rather than expressly forbidding the very possibility of a Holocaust literature, they have instead concerned themselves with analyzing the characteristics of this literature and with formulating the standards that serious Holocaust literature should live up to. More specifically, they have tried to critically evaluate the ways in which this literature has actually responded to the problem of the Holocaust's impossible representation.[5] Thus, it has been a keenly felt conviction among the most significant scholars of Holocaust literature that the Holocaust places demands upon literature and its authors that cannot be answered by the conventions of traditional, bourgeois literary forms, with their tendency to please the reader through the joys of escapism, identification and catharsis. By contrast, it is felt that Holocaust literature is not a pleasing literature, but rather a thoroughly demanding, discomforting literature. As Alvin Rosenfeld writes, Holocaust literature is "nothing if not language in a condition of severe diminishment and decline," a "literature of decomposition," a "literature of fragments, of partial and provisional forms."[6] Its nature is "revisionary and essentially antithetical" and it "refutes and rejects its direct literary antecedents" (29); indeed, "Holocaust literature is simply and complexly something else, as the cataclysm that triggered it was something else" (20). Clearly, Holocaust literature is not expected to be dealing in the bright and playful, but rather in grave and serious matters.

Closely related to that expectation is an outspoken and widespread preference for authors who are by personal experience "acquainted with the night," as Lawrence Langer has phrased it.[7] Though Langer's interests encompass Jewish authors and non-Jewish authors, European and American writers, as well as poetry and prose, he nonetheless feels that "anyone seriously concerned with the literature of atrocity must devote his primary attention to those writers who were more closely allied with the events of the Holocaust even when they were not literally survivors."[8] Indeed, the canon of Holocaust literature features amongst its highest ranks those

5 As an illustration of how Holocaust literary criticism is fascinated by the ways in which this literature responds to the problem of the Holocaust's impossible representation, consider Alvin Rosenfeld who suggests that "[a]t just those points where, through some abiding and still operative reflex of language, silence converts once more into words—even into words about silence—Holocaust literature is born." Alvin H. Rosenfeld, *A Double Dying: Reflections on Holocaust Literature* (Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press, 1980), 15.

6 Rosenfeld, *A Double Dying*, 27, 28, 33. Hereafter cited in the text.

7 The phrase "acquainted with the night" is the title of the second chapter of Langer's *The Holocaust and the Literary Imagination*.

8 Langer, *The Holocaust and the Literary Imagination*, 20.

writings produced by authors who personally experienced the depths of the ghettos and the camps—writers like Elie Wiesel, Primo Levi, Tadeusz Borowski, Charlotte Delbo—and whose work therefore bears the label of testimony rather than fiction. Sue Vice even goes as far as to note that "critical preference for testimony over fiction has become such a truism that it is hard to find any voices dissenting from it."[9] Though it is my impression that this is actually changing at present, it still is a commonly held view: as recently as 2004, Robert Eaglestone argued strongly in favor of the genre of testimony over, for instance, novels, writing that "it is this genre … that holds best the memory of the Holocaust."[10]

While it is certainly legitimate to study (Holocaust) testimony as a separate genre with its own distinct characteristics, problems arise when testimony is held up as the model by which the merits and demerits of all writing about the Holocaust should be judged. Clearly, this is to court a very narrow view of the genre of Holocaust literature. The same goes for efforts to conceive of Holocaust literature as "something else" (Rosenfeld) or as a "literature of atrocity" (Langer)—that is, to view this literature solely and exclusively in terms of an "anti-cathartic" literature about horror. There is indeed such a sub-genre of Holocaust writing, but it is definitely not the only one. In fact, both these critical approaches represent very normative perspectives on Holocaust literature and risk turning Holocaust literary criticism into "exercises of moral connoisseurship, distinguishing 'responsible' or 'proper' representations of the Holocaust from works deemed 'trivializing' or 'distorted,'" as Jeffrey Shandler puts it.[11] Moreover, and more significantly perhaps, these approaches to Holocaust literature tend to underestimate the possibilities, and resilience of literature in the face of almost unimaginable horrors. This is not to romantically and naively celebrate the "power of literature," but to point out, rather, that it is in the nature of literature to exhaust standards and categories and to subvert patterns of expectation.

Indeed, how could these traditional views do justice to, for instance, an undeniably crucial text like the diary of Anne Frank, which is precisely *not* a literature of atrocity and stands out not for being "something else," but rather for being so close and recognizable to us?[12] And how would it make

9 Sue Vice, *Holocaust Fiction* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 5.

10 Robert Eaglestone, *The Holocaust and the Postmodern* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 71.

11 Jeffrey Shandler, *While America Watches: Televising the Holocaust* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), xvii.

12 In fact, Rosenfeld is quite appreciative of Anne Frank's diary and its "freshly

sense of Englander's "The Tumblers," that, as a tragicomic tale published in 1998 by a Jewish American born in 1970, not only self-consciously (and therefore ironically) cherishes the pleasures of "traditional" reading, but also emphasizes its inevitable distance to the events of the Holocaust? Surely, this does not make the story blasphemous. In fact, to dismiss the story for not being testimony, or for being too blithely (tragi)comic is to not understand that the power and appeal of "The Tumblers" lies precisely in its tragicomic ambivalence and the ways in which it subverts both our expectations of a comic Yiddish folk tale and, more significantly, those of serious Holocaust fiction.

Even if the historical facts of the Holocaust are relatively stable, the sheer variety of Holocaust literature and art suggests that the *cultural* significance of this history is eminently open-ended, subject to endless re-imaginings and reinterpretations. Consequently, it appears to me to be more useful to conceive of Holocaust literature—its forms, functions, and contents—inclusively, rather than restrictively and normatively. In this respect, Robert Eaglestone has cogently demonstrated (though he uses the slightly more narrow term "Holocaust fiction") that "Holocaust literature" is not at all an obvious category, nor can it be easily delineated.[13] Eaglestone points out that if it may seem obvious that Holocaust fiction must be in some way about the Holocaust, it is not at all clear where this "about the Holocaust" begins or ends (102). In fact, he even allows that fiction in which the Holocaust is only an implicit presence can also be considered Holocaust fiction (105). As a way of solving these issues of demarcation, Eaglestone usefully suggests that "Holocaust fiction is a temporal, not a

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and vividly told" story. Yet he correctly notes that "to limit one's understanding of the Holocaust to such a book as Anne Frank's diary is to grasp only the most preliminary outline of the coming war against the Jews." Rosenfeld, *A Double Dying*, 51. Lawrence Langer, by contrast, is vehemently critical of the diary. Though he is unable to deny Anne's talents as a writer, Langer feels that her diary teaches us nothing about the Holocaust. In fact, "readers are much to blame for accepting and promoting the idea that her *Diary* is a major Holocaust text and has anything of consequence to tell us about the atrocities that culminated in the murder of European Jewry." Instead, Langer argues, Anne's diary "sanctions and indeed enacts in its very text a designed *avoidance* of the very experience it is reputed to grant us some exposure to." And he condescendingly suggests that "[a]s a narrative of adolescence only peripherally concerned with the Holocaust it may have served a purpose, but perhaps it is time to abandon it and to turn to more adult fare." Lawrence L. Langer, *Using and Abusing the Holocaust* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2006), 18, 20, 27.

13 Eaglestone, *The Holocaust and the Postmodern*, 101–110. Hereafter cited in the text.

content, label, and it names not only texts, but a way of reading: a genre. It is to be read with a specific range of questions, responses, demands, and issues in mind" (107). One consequence of this is that Holocaust literature is not so much severely limited or even impossible, as has been claimed by so many exceptionalist critics, but rather that literature is one of the most expansive and capacious means of engaging with this history. Indeed, as an art form operating in the (abstract) realm of the symbolic order, literature is capable, more than any other mode of art or discourse, of representing the Holocaust as well as contemporary culture's dynamic relationship to it.[14] More than any other mode of art or discourse, it allows different generations to relate to the Holocaust as they see fit and in ways that answer to their respective and contemporary concerns and interests. Such a view is intended precisely to "normalize" the field of Holocaust literary studies and thus to become much more sensitive to the different functions that different types of Holocaust literature serve, in different contexts. This puts us in a much better position to understand, for instance, contemporary Jewish American literature about the Holocaust.

Recent Jewish American Holocaust fictions such as Englander's "The Tumblers," and novels like Jonathan Safran Foer's *Everything Is Illuminated*, Nicole Krauss's *The History of Love*, or Michael Chabon's *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay* are in various ways impious Holocaust fictions. As third generation American Holocaust writing, they are in no way first-hand testimony. Moreover, they often openly Americanize the Holocaust, approaching this history from contemporary and American viewpoints rather than historicizing or contextualizing it. They even do not

14 The reason for this extraordinary capacity of literature was recognized already by Edmund Burke in his treatise *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*. Burke suggested "that eloquence and poetry are as capable, nay indeed much more capable, of making deep and lively impressions than any other arts, and even than nature itself in very many cases" (258). The chief reason for this is precisely the fact that literature is not a mimetic but a symbolic art form, which creates well-nigh endless possibilities of representation. As Burke points out, "by words we have it in our power to make such *combinations* as we cannot possibly do otherwise. By this power of combining we are able, by the addition of well-chosen circumstances, to give a new life and force to the simple object" (259, italics in original). Burke helpfully explains the point by comparing the powers of poetry to painting: "[i]n painting we may represent any fine figure we please; but we never can give it those enlivening touches which it may receive from words. To represent an angel in a picture, you can only draw a beautiful young man winged: but what painting can furnish out anything so grand as the addition of one word, 'the angel of the *Lord*'? It is true, I have here no clear idea; but these words affect the mind more than the sensible image did; which is all I contend for" (259, italics in original). See also note 3.

shirk from interspersing their engagements with this tragic history with unabashedly comic notes. While the canonical works of Holocaust literature tend to evoke—and were traditionally praised for—a close "acquaintance to the night," these more recent works seem in fact to be marked more by their *distance* to the Holocaust: even as they attempt to approach the Holocaust, each of these works effectively highlights that their engagement with this past is indirect, worked upon by separation in time and space, and therefore tenuous and highly mediated. In other words, their various engagements with the Holocaust are shaped by what I propose to call a dynamic of distance: a process in which the distance to the Holocaust of contemporary (Jewish) American generations manifests itself in diverse literary embodiments. However, far from delegitimizing these works, this dynamic of distance, I will suggest, is precisely the way in which these Jewish American writers propose to make sense of the Holocaust. Indeed, rather than trivializing the Holocaust, the dynamic of distance enables new artistic approaches to this history, and consequently enables an exploration and renewal of its significance for contemporary American generations.

In Englander's "The Tumblers," this dynamic of distance asserts itself through the intervention of, primarily, genre. "The Tumblers" is in fact an unusual Holocaust story of the third generation because, set in German-occupied Poland of the 1940s, the events of the Holocaust are very close by. However, with the very opening sentence of the story—"Who would have thought that a war of such proportions would bother to turn its fury against the fools of Chelm?"[15]—it is clear that this tale does not take place in historical time, but at the intersection of history and the tradition of Yiddish storytelling surrounding "the fools of Chelm," made famous by Isaac Bashevis Singer among others. The use of the folk tale places the reality of the Holocaust continually at a distance. In fact, historical events in the story are experienced by its characters according to the patterns laid out by genre and tradition: the proverbial logic of the fools "was still employed when the invaders built the walls around a corner of the city, creating the ghetto of Chelm" (28). And, by that same logic, the main character Mendel "was happy to find that his grandfather's wisdom had been adopted among the peasants with whom he dealt. Potatoes were treated as gold, and a sack of gold might as well have been potatoes. … He took the whole business as a positive sign, thinking that people were beginning to regain their good sense" (28–29).

15 Englander, "The Tumblers," 27. Hereafter cited in the text.

Of course, to the reader it is painfully clear what is really going on in "The Tumblers," and what the actual meaning is of Mendel's business ventures, "the magic of disappearing Jews," and those remaining puffs of smoke. In fact, Englander's artistic license with regard to historical reality reaches an absurd climax by the time the fools, dressed up in ridiculous costumes made of their underwear, are made to do acrobatics in front of Germans. This scene is a mockery of a selection in a concentration camp, but with the same stakes: life itself. Yet Englander is not simply abusing the Holocaust as a pretext for presenting us mere scenes of farce. Thinking about the acrobatic act, the character Mendel realizes that "it was an absurd undertaking. But then again, Mendel thought, no more unbelievable than the reality from which they'd escaped, no more unfathomable than the magic of disappearing Jews" (42–43). Indeed, the (tragi-) comic displacement of the reality of the Holocaust has the effect that the well-known facts of the Holocaust are endowed with a new urgency and significance. In other words, the fools' naiveté and inability to interpret reality *renews* on behalf of the reader a sense of the enormity of these horrific events.

Though "The Tumblers" puts the Holocaust at a distance primarily through the mode of genre, the larger context of *For the Relief of Unbearable Urges*, the volume in which "The Tumblers" is collected, places the Holocaust in a broad array of Jewish themes—historic as well as contemporary, American, and Israeli ones. It is precisely the factors of the contemporary and the American (or the "contemporary American") that emerge as central themes in the Holocaust-inflected writing of authors like Foer, Krauss, and Chabon. Lee Behlman, for instance, writing about Englander, Foer, and Chabon, observes that

> [w]hat stands out about the recent fictions under discussion here is the degree to which they emphasize the now-vast temporal and cultural distance between late twentieth and twenty-first century America and the Holocaust, as well as the gap between our time and the American experience of the Holocaust for previous generations.[16]

The gap between contemporary America and the Holocaust is certainly very striking in *Everything Is Illuminated* by Jonathan Safran Foer and *The History of Love* by Nicole Krauss.

16 Lee Behlman, "The Escapist: Fantasy, Folklore, and the Pleasures of the Comic Book in Recent Jewish American Holocaust Fiction," *Shofar* 22, no. 3 (2004): 60–61, doi: 10.1353/sho.2004.0048.

Foer's *Everything Is Illuminated* presents itself as a novel jointly written, in installments, by two different "authors," and combining two distinct storylines. One of these storylines is about a young American Jew named Jonathan Safran Foer who travels to Ukraine to find the shtetl where his family came from, and, in particular, to find the daughter of the family who helped his grandfather escape the Nazis. On this trip, Jonathan travels together with Alex (a Ukrainian translator), Alex's grandfather (a blind driver) and Sammy Davis Jr. Jr. (Grandfather's mad guide dog, usually referred to as "the bitch"). This part of the novel is rendered in a more or less realistic mode and is ostensibly authored by Alex, the Ukrainian translator, whose English is of a most bizarre and flamboyant kind. In fact, Alex's chapters constitute a heavily fictionalized account of an actual trip to Ukraine that Foer undertook in the summer of 1997 as a twenty year old undergraduate student. Foer had intended to write a non-fiction book about this trip, but his preparations had been poor and he did not find anything that could possibly fill such a book. As Foer says in an interview, the "comedy of errors" that is the novel "was really a tragedy of errors, and it lasted a mere three days. I found nothing but nothing, and in that nothing—a landscape of total absence—nothing was to be found. (There is such a thing as a rich nothing, of course. But this was no such nothing.)."[17] However, it was also exactly the failure of the trip that allowed Foer to write a novel, instead of a non-fiction book: "[t]he complete absence that I found in Ukraine gave my imagination total freedom," as he relates to Jeffrey Goldberg.[18] In fact it is also precisely "this nothing but nothing," this "complete absence," that is insistently borne witness to by the novel. Indeed, as an American attempt to come to terms with the history of the Holocaust more than half a century after the fact, it constantly highlights and emphasizes that its own and this contemporary period's distance to these events is of a magnificent and well-nigh insuperable nature. Strikingly, therefore, as an extended meditation on the absence of history, the novel forwards again and again how it can only be a "novel about the Holocaust" by being insuperably far removed from this history—or, if you will, precisely by *not* being of or about the Holocaust.

17 Jonathan Safran Foer, interview by John Mullan, *Guardian.co.uk*, March 20, 2010, http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2010/mar/20/jonathan-safran-foer-everything-illuminated; on Foer's trip, see also Jonathan Safran Foer, interview by Suzie Mackenzie, *Guardian.co.uk*, May 21, 2005, http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2005/may/21/fiction.features/print.

18 Jonathan Safran Foer, interview by *BookBrowse*, accessed July 15, 2011, http://www.bookbrowse.com/author_interviews/full/index.cfm?author_number=1120.

On the most basic level, this absence of history manifests itself in Alex's account in the very fact that it turns out to be surprisingly difficult simply to pinpoint in the present the precise geographical location of a particular Holocaust history. Jonathan travels to Ukraine with an old photograph of his grandfather and the Polish family who saved him, including a young daughter probably named Augustine. His aim is to find this Augustine as well as the shtetl where his grandfather lived: "I want to see Trachimbrod. … To see what it's like, how my grandfather grew up, where I would be now if it weren't for the war. … And I want to see what it's like now. I don't think there are any Jews left, but maybe there are. And the shtetls weren't only Jews, so there should be others to talk to."[19] However, as Jonathan, Alex, his grandfather, and Sammy Davis Jr. Jr. set out on their "very rigid search," it turns out that Jonathan's wishes—perhaps informed by a characteristically American historical consciousness—had been naïve. Neither Jonathan nor his Ukrainian guides know where Trachimbrod is, and though they meet many people whom they ask for directions, no one is able to help. On the contrary: "[n]ot one of them knew where Trachimbrod was, and not one of them had ever heard of it, but all of them became angry or silent when I inquired," Alex writes (114). They start driving through the Ukrainian countryside aimlessly and after a while, they get seriously lost. "It was seeming as if we were in the wrong country, or the wrong century, or as if Trachimbrod had disappeared, and so had the memory of it" (115). And so, Jonathan had come from America to somehow breach the distance between himself and his past. Yet by an ironic twist, the breaching of geographical space only serves to confirm the enormous and unreachable distance in which the past has receded with the passing of just over fifty years.

At last, however, the travelers encounter a very old woman, who, after being severely pressed by Alex, confesses that they have found Trachimbrod: "'Oh,' she said, and she released a river of tears. 'You are here. I am it'" (118). The old woman, whose name is Lista, though the men at first believe her to be Augustine, turns out to be one of the very few survivors of the German massacre of Trachimbrod, and the only one still alive. All that remains of Trachimbrod is stored inside her small two-room house and in her memory, and as such, she *is* indeed Trachimbrod. One of the rooms in her house is full of piles of clothes and hundreds of shoes, and it is impossible to see the walls because of all the photographs. The other

19 Jonathan Safran Foer, *Everything Is Illuminated* (London: Penguin, 2003), 59–60. Hereafter cited in the text

room is packed with boxes with writing on them. There are boxes marked "WEDDINGS AND OTHER CELEBRATIONS," "PRIVATES: JOURNALS/DIARIES/SKETCHBOOKS/UNDERWEAR," but there is also a box enigmatically marked "DARKNESS" and one marked "DUST" (147). The house is a kind of archive that makes little or no sense, except perhaps to Lista herself. She shows some of the contents to Alex, Jonathan, and Grandfather, but it seems inevitable that after the passing away of Lista, all that will remain of Trachimbrod will be this collection of near-meaningless bits and pieces. Even in this instance, then, when the men have at last managed to find a living witness to historical events and physical traces of Trachimbrod, what they have actually found does not unambiguously make history "present." On the contrary, Lista and her archive in effect resemble Derridean cinders that would crumble as soon as they are touched, and as such they rather serve as reminders of the insurmountable historical absence the men are confronted with.

The radical nature of this historical absence is represented even more palpably and dramatically when Alex and Grandfather ask if Lista can show them Trachimbrod. Lista tells them that "[t]here is nothing. … There is no Trachimbrod anymore. It ended fifty years ago. … There is nothing to see. It is only a field. I could exhibit you any field and it would be the same as exhibiting you Trachimbrod" (154–155). Nevertheless, Grandfather insists that she take them there and it is on this excursion to the actual site of Trachimbrod that the novel most fully explores the literal and metaphorical implications of the absence left behind in the wake of the Holocaust. They leave when there is only little daylight left—Lista walking and the men following in the car. However, to the great frustration of Alex and Grandfather, Lista walks very slowly, taking breaks along the way. After a while it had become "too dark to witness almost anything" (184). At this point, Lista halts again and announced they have arrived. This causes confusion:

> "we are here." "She says we are here," I told the hero. "What?" "I informed you that there would be nothing," she said. "It was all destroyed." "What do you mean we're here?" the hero asked. "Tell him it is because it is so dark," Grandfather said to me, "and that we could see more if it was not dark." "It is so dark," I told him. "No," she said, "this is all that you would see. It is always like this, always dark." (184)

It is a moment of central significance within the novel: instead of coming face to face with the past, or at least with traces of the past, the travelers encounter a darkness, a nothingness, a void. Superficially, it may seem as

if Foer is placing himself in the long-standing exceptionalist tradition that considers the Holocaust as beyond existing categories, something from another world, an event that cannot be spoken or represented. In fact, Foer has Lista, the traumatized survivor, express such a view when she suggests that Trachimbrod is covered in a darkness that seems not of this world. However, that view is de-stabilized by Grandfather (in a way, also a traumatized survivor, as will be "illuminated" in the course of the novel), who commonsensically notes that it simply has become night. Yet Alex also witnesses a darkness or a void, but the terms in which he describes it are neither problematically transcendental or superficially commonsensical:

> I implore myself to paint Trachimbrod, so you will know why we were so overawed. There was nothing. When I utter 'nothing' I do not mean there was nothing except for two houses, and some wood on the ground, and pieces of glass, and children's toys, and photographs. When I utter that there was nothing, what I intend is that there was not any of these things or any other things. (184)

The void that Alex experiences is registered not in moral, philosophical, epistemological, ethical, or any other metaphorically removed terms, but rather in a quite literal sense of physical or material absence. Standing in that dark field, there is nothing there to remind Alex either of the Holocaust or of the Jewish life that came before it. Alex articulates a problem that is characteristic especially of the "third generation" after the Holocaust, to which he, as well as his creator, belong: there is a wealth of knowledge and sources about the Holocaust available to them, but the closer they try to get to it, the more they experience the irrevocable physical and temporal absence of the Holocaust and their own insurmountable distance to it.

Incidentally, one of the most gripping symbolic manifestations of this great distance occurs when Lista gives a wedding ring to Jonathan that had belonged to a certain Rivka. Jonathan and Alex suppose the ring functions positively as evidence, or as something that made their trip meaningful, because they would have something to find. But Lista disagrees. Somewhat enigmatically, she says to Jonathan: "[t]he ring does not exist for you. You exist for the ring. The ring is not in case of you. You are in case of the ring" (192). She then tries to put the ring on Jonathan's finger and uses some force, hurting him, but the ring is too small. "'It will not harmonize,' she said, and when she removed the ring I could see that the ring had made a cut around the hero's most petite finger" (193). In a quite literal sense, the past cannot be grasped so easily; by attempting to do so you will only succeed in cutting yourself, Foer seems to say.

This sense of physical and metaphorical distance to the Holocaust is heightened by the fact that in the few instances when the novel refers to the Holocaust more or less directly, any sense the reader might get of unmediated access is at the same time subverted. In Alex's chapters, these instances are the accounts—Holocaust testimonies—offered by Lista and later by Grandfather. The novel makes it emphatically clear that Lista's story of the Trachimbrod massacre reaches the reader only after passing a multitude of obstacles. Lista's testimony is delivered not quite voluntarily (she only decides to tell the story after being pressed to do so by Grandfather), and it is translated simultaneously by Alex, resulting in a continuously disrupted narrative: "'[t]hey burned the synagogue.' 'They burned the synagogue.' 'That was the first thing they did.' 'That was first'" (185). Furthermore, Lista's account is repeatedly interrupted by questions and comments from Grandfather, narrative descriptions by Alex, as well as extradiegetic narratorial commentary by Alex, presented in between brackets (185–189). Some similar as well as some different stylistic techniques are used in Grandfather's testimony (226–228, 243–252), the most notable among the latter being the gradual disappearance of punctuation and the occasional contraction of separate words, which paradoxically heightens the sense of dramatic action while slowing down and making more demanding the reading process. All these stylistic devices serve to announce to the reader that the testimony presented is not *itself* the Holocaust, but rather a literary construction distanced from that historical reality, even as it somehow, convolutedly, refers to that reality.

On the level of content, moreover, both Lista and Grandfather are not unproblematic witnesses. Lista, for instance, answers the question of how she survived with a long story about how her *sister* survived. There are many hints that suggest that this response is an instance of traumatic dissociation and that the story of Lista's sister is really the story of Lista herself, yet this confusion is never cleared up. On the contrary, if she does suffer from traumatic dissociation, the possibility also remains that she is, after all, Augustine—a suspicion that is fed by her own admission that she welcomed Jonathan's grandfather Safran into her home a year or two after the massacre (190–191). Grandfather's testimony is equally confusing, because in his account of a Nazi raid on the shtetl of Kolki, where Grandfather lived during the war, his Jewish friend Herschel calls him Eli (250, 251), while the reader knows that he is called Alexander, like Alex, and like Alex's father (5). Menachem Feuer concludes that this must mean that Grandfather is Jewish, which may be so, but may equally not be so (because if he was Jewish, why was not Grandfather also killed in

the Kolki massacre like his friend Herschel?).[20] Then, finally, it must be remembered that the accounts of Lista and Grandfather are instances of reported speech (or, quite literally, "hearsay") that are not only transmitted but also translated by Alex, whose English skills are notably erratic. All of which is not to say that these testimonies are untrustworthy, but rather that they are presented by the novel to inspire a host of questions that the novel does not answer and *cannot* answer, because, as an American, twenty-first century novel, its distance to the events recounted is too great.

In the novel's other storyline, the horrors of the Holocaust also remain at a relative distance. These chapters, written by Jonathan, tell a magical realist, fiddler on the roof type of history of Trachimbrod that starts in 1791 and ends in 1942, when the Nazis killed the entire population of the shtetl. Obviously, the events of the Holocaust are no central part of this history quite simply because these events only come at its very end. More significantly, however, the sense of distance is sustained, as in Englander's "The Tumblers," by the very genre conventions of these chapters. Jonathan's magical realist Trachimbrod is a mythical place, cut off from the rest of the world and—almost—from history. In Trachimbrod, "[a]s in [Gabriel Garcia-Marquez's] Macondo," Menachem Feuer writes, "we hear nothing of the world outside. Trachimbrod is totally self-enclosed: a mythic space where almost anything can happen."[21] Eventually though, history and the outside world do catch up with Trachimbrod and with Jonathan's tale, but never directly, never in a straightforward confrontation. Instead, history appears in the newspapers from which Jonathan's grandfather Safran and the Gypsy girl, his lover, cut letters with which they write notes to each other (233); it appears on a radio that no one listens to, because it is "Trachimday," the local holiday (267); or, it appears in comments of the omniscient narrator, who knows, for instance, that a field on the other side of the river Brod "would, soon enough, be the site of Kovel's first mass execution" (255).

And so, even when Jonathan's history of Trachimbrod approaches the 1940s and the signs of the impending German onslaught become more pervasive, Trachimbrod through its very generic constitution resists

20 Menachem Feuer, "Almost Friends: Post-Holocaust Comedy, Tragedy, and Friendship in Jonathan Safran Foer's *Everything Is Illuminated*," *Shofar* 25, no. 2 (Winter 2007): 45, doi: 10.1353/sho.2007.0020.

21 Ibid., 37. For a more detailed analysis of the mythical surroundings of Trachimbrod, see Francisco Collado-Rodriguez, "Ethics in the Second Degree: Trauma and Dual Narratives in Jonathan Safran Foer's *Everything Is Illuminated*," *Journal of Modern Literature* 32, no. 1 (Fall 2008): 58–60, doi: 10.1353/jml.0.0028.

history. In fact, the more forcefully history presents itself, the stronger and more defiant becomes Trachimbrod's opposition and the more tightly the shtetl clings to its magical realist modes of giving meaning to events: when the villagers had heard Germans bombs falling nearby, "Trachimbrod itself was overcome with a strange inertness. … Activity was replaced with thought. Memory" (258). And consequently, "nothing was done. No decisions were made. No bags packed or houses emptied. No trenches dug or buildings fortified. Nothing" (262). It is only in the very last Trachimbrod chapter that the advent of history can no longer be stopped. It is Trachimday, 1942, and the Germans are about to bomb the shtetl and then march in. The narrator notes that "[h]ere it is almost impossible to go on, because we know what happened, and wonder why they don't" (270). Indeed, a few lines further, language breaks up in a desperate attempt to hold history at bay: a page and a half filled with dots and a few scattered phrases ("There is still time" [271]) follows. Then, the narrator recovers his voice, and drily recounts in one paragraph how the Nazis marched into Trachimbrod and forced the Jews into the synagogue. One soldier threw "the nine volumes of *The Book of Recurrent Dreams* onto the bonfire of Jews," not noticing how one page fell out. This page is then included; it contains *The dream of the end of the world*. In this dream the river Brod itself speaks, and she recounts that there was a bombardment during which the population of Trachimbrod sought cover in her waters where they drowned. And with this prophetic dream, the history of Trachimbrod, which had begun on "March 18, 1791, when Trachim B's double-axle wagon either did or did not pin him against the bottom of the Brod River" (8), has come full circle: a cyclic ending that mythically incorporates, at the last moment, the arrival of history.

Whereas in Foer's *Everything Is Illuminated*, the (irretrievable) past is the explicit object of attraction that draws the main character Jonathan to actively undertake a journey to Europe, in Nicole Krauss's *The History of Love*, the history of the Holocaust surfaces almost as if by chance in a novel that is set almost entirely in contemporary America. Interweaving multiple storylines, the novel is in part about Leo Gursky, an embittered and lonely survivor of the Holocaust now living in New York. Leo is from Poland, where, as a young man, he was in love with a girl called Alma and wrote a book about her called *The History of Love*. After the war, Leo moves to New York, where he finds Alma again. However, he not only finds out that Alma gave birth to Leo's son, who grows up to become a famous American novelist, but also that she married another man. Interwoven with Leo Gursky's story is that of a young American girl named Alma Singer, who

was named after a character in a Spanish novel called *The History of Love*, written by a certain Zvi Litvinoff. Alma's father died when she was seven and now she lives with her little brother and mother, who is a translator. Alma is frustrated by her mother who is in constant mourning for her late husband, and Alma wants to bring new happiness into her life. When a mysterious person named Jacob Marcus asks her mother to translate *The History of Love*, Alma secretly answers his letter on her mother's behalf. At the same time, in order to better understand who the mysterious Jacob Marcus might be—he turns out to be Leo Gursky's son—she decides to find out more about *The History of Love*. Unexpectedly, Alma's literary investigations soon develop into a fully-fledged quest that leads her to confront both the history of the Holocaust and her own identity. The reader's experience runs parallel, in a sense, with Alma's researches into *The History of Love*, as Krauss interweaves the stories of Gursky and Alma with that of another character: Zvi Litvinoff, the supposed author of the novel Alma is investigating. It turns out that Litvinoff was also a Jewish refugee from Poland, who escaped before the Holocaust commenced. Right before Litvinoff left Poland, his friend Leo Gursky gave him the Yiddish manuscript of a novel called *The History of Love* for safe-keeping. After the war, Litvinoff, who lost his entire family, assumes his friend died as well. He starts translating and rewriting Gursky's manuscript and publishes it with a small Chilean publisher under his own name. And so, though in more ways and more complexly than this brief summary can do justice to, Krauss's novel weaves together diverse storylines and characters' lives which are all ultimately interconnected through an obscure novel called *The History of Love*. Significantly, moreover, the fate of this novel tenuously but unmistakably connects the Holocaust with a fundamentally contemporary American story. Thus, the novel suggests that, no matter how distant and far removed, the history of the Holocaust continues to hold significance, no matter how tangential, to the contemporary American situation. But more significantly, perhaps, it also and at the same time suggests that any contemporary American engagement with this history is irrevocably shaped precisely by the distance implied by this American perspective, as well as by its specific contemporary concerns.

Especially in the chapters that concern Alma, a precocious American fourteen year old living in New York at the beginning of the twenty-first century, the Holocaust is essentially a very distant event that can be Googled or looked up in archives and museums. Suspecting that the Alma of *The History of Love* might have been real, Alma Singer looks up the character's full name, "Alma Meremenski," on the internet. But all the

search engine is able to present her with is a list of immigrants who arrived in New York and "a list of Holocaust victims recorded at Yad Vashem, … but, to my relief, because I didn't want to lose her before I'd even begun to look, no Alma."[22] In other words, for Alma, the Holocaust is not so much a personally felt traumatic event, but rather, ancient, perhaps even sleep-inducing history: at one point, she notices her Uncle Julian, "asleep with his glasses on, Volume II of [Raul Hilberg's] *The Destruction of the European Jews* open on his chest" (270). Yet this is not to say that Alma's distant relationship to the Holocaust trivializes this history. Even if Alma is confronted with its history only when she commences a hunt after the significance of an obscure novel, motivated less by historical curiosity than by a somewhat childlike desire to make her mother happy, her search quickly becomes more serious. Her friend Mischa expresses surprise at her sudden eagerness, but she "didn't know how to say that even though I'd started out looking for someone who could make my mother happy again, now I was looking for something else, too. About the woman I was named after. And about me" (224). Through an indirect though meaningful encounter with the past, including that of the Holocaust, a childish whim has turned into a full search for identity.

A more direct engagement with the Holocaust might be expected in the chapters dealing with the novels' survivor characters—in the first place Leo Gursky, but also his old friend Zvi Litvinoff. But even in these parts of the novel, these characters' admittedly traumatic memory of the Holocaust is a relatively unobtrusive presence among the descriptions of other aspects and dimensions that give shape to their sometimes almost prosaic postwar lives. In the opening pages of the novel, for instance, Leo Gursky gives a not very flattering portrait of himself as he spends his days of old age in a small but chock-full apartment in New York. With a wry and unembarrassed honesty, he recounts how he battles his loneliness by making "a point of being seen" (4)—that is, by deliberately dropping his change in a crowded store, by trying on sneakers with the help of an attendant, but never buying, and recently, by responding to an ad in a newspaper that asked for a nude model for a drawing class. He recounts the story of his life: of the time when he came to America, his heart condition, his friend and neighbor Bruno who he knew as a child in Poland and met again in America (though at the end of the novel it turns out Bruno died during World War II), his youthful ambitions as a writer, his childhood sweetheart.

22 Nicole Krauss, *The History of Love* (London: Penguin, 2006), 215. Hereafter cited in the text.

Only then, in a single paragraph, he recounts how "everything fell apart" when the Nazis massacred his village, though he survived (12). After this passage, his narrative continues for almost forty pages with only one brief mention of the Holocaust. And in another of Leo's chapters further in the novel, the Holocaust resonates powerfully but also highly metaphorically or "subtextually" in a moving rumination on loss. Addressing his dead father (or God?), Leo pauses to think about everything and everyone he has lost in his life, a lot of which during or because of the Holocaust:

> I lost *Mameh*. … I lost Fritzy. … I lost Sari and Hanna to the dogs. I lost Herschel to the rain. I lost Josef to a crack in time. I lost the sound of laughter. I lost a pair of shoes. … I lost the only woman I ever wanted to love. I lost years. I lost books. I lost the house where I was born. And I lost Isaac. So who is to say that somewhere along the way, without my knowing it, I didn't also lose my mind? (269)

It is in fact only near the very end of the novel, at the moment when Gursky is about to meet Alma Singer, that he actively recalls brief moments of his life which took place in the Holocaust. But even here, these memories, painful as they are, are no more than snippets from a life, fragments of events which have shaped that life, but do not make up the full contents of it. Similarly, direct references to the Holocaust are a very sparse presence in the chapters concerning Zvi Litvinoff. The unidentified omniscient narrator of these parts recounts that Litvinoff's sister Miriam "was shot in the head by a Nazi officer in the Warsaw Ghetto," and that with the exception of his son Boris who had escaped on a Kindertransport, none of Litvinoff's relatives survived the Holocaust (106–107). The narrator also tells how during the war Litvinoff made it safely to Chile, where, with a radio he allowed himself, "[h]e listened with horror to the progress of the Nazis" (247), and how, after the war, he slowly learned of the terrible events that had taken place in Europe and what had happened to his family (249).

All of this is not to downplay the ways in which *The History of Love* can be characterized or read as a Holocaust novel, but to highlight the novel's distance to the events of the Holocaust: the Holocaust is *there*, significantly and ineffaceably, but at the same time its presence is highly tenuous, located far away on the edge of the horizon, its contours barely visible. Indeed, what distinguishes *The History of Love* and other third generation Holocaust writing from earlier forms of Holocaust literature is that it is not solely "about the Holocaust" and, more significantly perhaps, it is not "about the Holocaust" in any immediate way. In the words of Jessica Lang, this third generation writing

> regularly refers to and incorporates events from the Holocaust, but it also balances and counters these references with other narrative strategies or counterpoints. While for first- and second-generation Holocaust writers the historical experience "conveys" a sense of immediacy and impact, the third generation writer views these events as an indirect part of the narrative, one balanced by other, also important, histories.[23]

In other words, third generation Holocaust writing situates the Holocaust in a significant relation to a wider realm of human experience—notably a contemporary American one. Indeed, the real concern of Krauss's *The History of Love* is not the history of the Holocaust in a narrow sense; it is, rather, to investigate the possibilities and significance of restoration, interhuman connection, and love in the face of trauma and loss, across time and distance, and to suggest that such delicate, fragile connections are facilitated especially by (imaginative) writing. In fact, Krauss's novel offers an apology for imaginative writing that rebuts the (in)famous notion inspired by Adorno that literature after the Holocaust is "barbaric."[24]

The issues of (imaginative) writing and writing in relation to the Holocaust are also themes of central importance in *Everything Is Illuminated*. In fact, this is the case not only in Alex's and Jonathan's respective chapters, but especially so in short sections that are interjected between the separate installments of the ostensibly co-authored novel: these sections consist of Alex's contribution to a correspondence between Jonathan and himself in which they comment extensively on each other's writing and reflect on what their trip and their writing mean to them.[25] In a variety of ways, then, Foer's novel constantly highlights its own inventedness and fictionality, emphasizing that its connection to history—Jewish history, Trachimbrod's history, the Holocaust—is constructed, made-up, not "real." Indeed, as Robert Eaglestone puts it, in *Everything Is Illuminated*, "it is precisely the distance from events that leads to its choice of novelistic style"[26]: a style that makes use of the full postmodern box of tricks in order to signal its own nature as artifice and its distance from historical reality. Again, the scene in which Jonathan, Alex, and Grandfather encounter a void in the dark field that used to be Trachimbrod is deeply

23 Jessica Lang, "*The History of Love*, the Contemporary Reader, and the Transmission of Holocaust Memory," *Journal of Modern Literature* 33, no. 1 (Fall 2009): 46, doi: 10.1353/jml.0.0082.

24 In chapter 7, I will return to these issues in *The History of Love* and submit them to a more thorough analysis.

25 These sections will also be discussed in more detail in chapter 7.

26 Eaglestone, *The Holocaust and the Postmodern*, 128.

significant. When the Holocaust is considered a void, this often means that it cannot and *should not* be represented, understood, or imagined. However, in narrating the scene in that empty field, Alex is thwarted not so much by any moral imperatives, but rather by the fact that there truly is nothing to re-*present*—that is, he can neither *present* nor *make present* the past itself or anything of the past. By addressing Alex's predicament and the issue of absence more generally, Foer reaffirms not so much the traditional ban on representing the Holocaust in literature; rather, he effectively opens up a space for meta-discourse concerning the limits but also the possibilities of representation. And as I shall explore in more detail in chapters 5 and 7, Alex's encounter with the void dramatically illustrates as well as justifies that Foer, as a twenty-first century Jewish American novelist, can *only* and inevitably *represent*—that is, fill this void with narrative and story. In such a way, Holocaust impiety at the same time also enables a sense of renewal.

Indeed, the fact that *Everything Is Illuminated* can only engage in meta-discourse, and can only tell stories rather than historical "truth," does not mean that the novel is simply an irresponsible or meaningless postmodern game, or that it is unable to bear witness to the traumatic reality of the Holocaust. On the contrary, the novel's key moment of "illumination"—Grandfather's confession that he is responsible for betraying his Jewish friend Herschel to the Germans, and thus for murdering him—present both Alex and Jonathan and, by extension, the reader, with the most pressing (and distressing) moral questions of guilt and responsibility. Also, when Alex is translating Lista's testimony for Jonathan, he notes in a narratorial aside that "[y]ou cannot know how it felt to have to hear these things and then repeat them, because when I repeated them, I felt like I was making them new again" (185). Clearly, for him, the events recounted in *Everything Is Illuminated* do register the presence of trauma. In fact, it is precisely through its stylistic disjointedness and the emphasis on distance that the novel might be said to be heavily impressed with the signs of trauma. However, in contrast with literary critic and trauma theorist Cathy Caruth, who would have it that through the notion of trauma, *history* might arise where immediate understanding may not, *Everything Is Illuminated* presents neither trauma nor history per se.[27] Instead, the traces of trauma are felt only through the very *absence* of history, through the dynamic of distance. More in line with Jean-François Lyotard, then,

27 Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1996), 11.

Everything Is Illuminated "[bears] witness not to the sublime, but to this aporia of art and to its pain. It does not say the unsayable, but says that it cannot say it."[28]

Yet what is particularly innovative about Foer's novel specifically and the third generation Holocaust literature under discussion here in general is the following. If the dynamic of distance operating in this writing is a way of saying that it (this literature) cannot say it (the Holocaust), *it often says this in remarkably comic ways*. Indeed, the comic mode is a key distancing strategy and therefore lies at the heart of the dynamic of distance. And in fact, a novel like *Everything Is Illuminated* is, among many other things, a notably and unabashedly comic novel. Alex's insane English, his self-aggrandizement, and corny sexual jokes, Jonathan's unworldliness, Grandfather's boorish anti-Semitism, Sammy Davis Jr. Jr.'s sheer maladjusted presence, or the antics of the richly variegated cast of characters inhabiting Trachimbrod: comedy is the unstoppable force that gives the novel a dazzling sense of life. But this does not mean that the comic dimension of the novel shuts out or marches over its very tragic dimension—on the contrary, it only serves to heighten it. As Alex writes in a letter to Jonathan, "*humorous is the only truthful way to tell a sad story*" (53, italics in original).[29] The comic, the playful and the humorous are also highly significant dimensions of *The History of Love*, as Jessica Lang has discussed at some length. According to Lang, they are "a means by which Krauss works to define her voice in a field threatened by diffusion and submersion."[30] Indeed, from Leo Gursky's wry self-descriptions to Alma's precocious and eccentric determination, her brother Bird's religious antics (not discussed in this chapter), and the novel's playful use of tone, style, even of space and typography: the use of the comic in *The History of Love* and other third generation Holocaust writing serves as one way of emphasizing and confirming its authors' highly characteristic position towards

28 Jean-François Lyotard, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 47.

29 At a later point in the novel, Jonathan says to Alex that "I used to think that humor was the only way to appreciate how wonderful and terrible the world is, to celebrate how big life is. … But now I think it's the opposite. Humor is a way of shrinking from that wonderful and terrible world" (158). However, one might ask if the two positions really exclude each other. Humor might be used to appreciate and celebrate the wonderful and terrible nature of the world, or it might be used to shrink from that wonderfulness and terribleness. But either way, humor is used precisely as a means to come to terms with and make sense of a wonderful and terrible world—a world that might otherwise remain meaningless or even destroy us.

30 Lang, "*The History of Love*," 51.

the Holocaust. Or, to put is more strongly, the dynamic of distance that marks this writing is also to a considerable extent a comic effect.

In an essay entitled "Holocaust Laughter?," published in 1988, Terrence Des Pres offers a still unsurpassed analysis of the comic in Holocaust literature.[31] A "normalizing" text that challenges received Holocaust pieties, Des Pres's commences by staking out the argument that Holocaust writing, like any other form of writing, "requires unproved, and usually undeclared, principles to generate order and authorize perspective" (216); that is to say, like all other forms of writing, Holocaust writing is "ideological" and dependent on certain "informing fictions" (216).[32] Des Pres's particular concern in his article is the "fiction" that anything pertaining to the Holocaust must be serious, solemn, and reverential. As a result of this convention, literature about the Holocaust that is comic and inspires laughter is automatically suspect. And yet, Des Pres points out, "[s]ince the time of Hippocrates … laughter's medicinal power has been recognized, and most of us would agree that humor heals" (218). This very basic knowledge rather complicates the demand for solemnity in literary responses to the Holocaust. Indeed, in what follows, Des Pres suggests that laughter may be a more wholesome response to the Holocaust than is commonly thought. By discussing three more or less comic fictional texts about the Holocaust, he argues in favor of the power of laughter even in—or even *precisely* in—literature about an event as extreme as the Holocaust.

"Displacement is the goal of any story, in degree; all fiction aims to usurp the real world with a world that is imagined," Des Pres claims (219). Yet this effect of displacement, or *distancing* as I have referred to it, is greater and more effective in comic than in realistic writing (219). Indeed, Des Pres suggests that this is precisely the reason "that realistic fiction so often fails. In its homage to fact, high seriousness is governed by a compulsion to reproduce, by the need to create a convincing likeness that never quite succeeds, never feels complete" (219). The stakes in comedy,

31 Terrence Des Pres, "Holocaust Laughter," in *Writing and the Holocaust*, ed. Berel Lang (New York and London: Holmes and Meier, 1988). Hereafter cited in the text.

32 As Des Pres sees it, there are three dominant fictions that determine Holocaust writing: first, that "[t]he Holocaust shall be represented … as a unique event"; second, that the Holocaust shall be represented in accordance with the facts, without "manipulation" of any sort, including artistic manipulation; and third, that "[t]he Holocaust shall be approached as a solemn or even a sacred event" (217). Like all ideology, these fictions "function as regulatory agencies to influence how we conceive of, and write about, matters of the Holocaust. Because they are fundamental and widely shared, we are convinced of their authority and accept them without question" (217).

however, are very different. Because the effects of displacement are more pronounced in comedy, comic writing escapes from the demands of likeness and verisimilitude. Indeed, "laughter is hostile to the world it depicts and subverts the respect on which representation depends" (219). This does not mean that using the comic mode in writing about the Holocaust would inherently be insensitive or even immoral. But the comic mode does reflect a very different attitude towards the world generally and towards the historical reality of the Holocaust in particular. "Whereas tragedy and lamentation," for instance, "affirm the authority of existence, and proceed in a mimetic mode that elevates *what is*, the comic spirit proceeds in an antimimetic mode that mocks *what is*, that deflates or even cancels the authority of its object" (220, italics in original).

Mocking the authority of the Holocaust through the comic mode is emphatically not the same as trivializing or defiling the memory of the Holocaust. Des Pres affirms the unremitting significance of the facts of the Holocaust as well as the demand for historical accuracy and integrity in engaging with these facts. But he suggests that the "tradition of high seriousness" with regard to writing about the Holocaust has led to "a certain weariness having settled upon us," and for that reason, he wants "to consider the energies of laughter as a further resource" (220). Des Pres argues that "a comic response to calamity is often more resilient, more effectively equal to terror and the sources of terror than a response that is solemn or tragic" (220). Comedy, as an antimimetic mode, is an inherently subversive mode, a force that ridicules and resists reality (220). In the literary works Des Pres discusses in the article—Tadeusz Borowski's *This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen*, Leslie Epstein's *King of the Jews* and Art Spiegelman's *Maus*—the comic has precisely such a subversive function. These works "refuse to take the Holocaust on its own crushing terms, even though all three depend for their foundation upon sharp memory of actual events. … Our knowledge of history is not denied but displaced" (220–221). Comic displacement creates distance, and thereby, a sense of perspective; through it, "we discover the capacity to go forward with, so to speak, a foot in both worlds. A margin of self-possession is thereby gained, a small priceless liberty, urging us to take heart" (221). Indeed, comic displacement goes hand in hand with the healing power of laughter, and so, the comic mode is also a progressive force that enables life to continue, a force that resists the vicious circle of traumatic fixation. Ultimately, Des Pres maintains that the literary works he analyses take the Holocaust seriously and responsibly; yet precisely through their various uses of the comic mode, "they afford us laughter's

benefit without betraying convictions. In these ways they foster resilience and are life-reclaiming" (232).

In short, the effect of the comic is that it places the Holocaust at a distance, and, by doing so, that it opens up the possibility of life's continuation, of moving forward, of renewal. On the one hand, then, the comic mode's distanced and impious orientation toward the Holocaust is particularly pertinent in a contemporary cultural and intellectual climate in which the limits of strict and exceptionalist Holocaust piety are increasingly felt. On the other hand, through its generally life-affirming and optimistic tendencies, the comic mode lends itself remarkably well to particularly American approaches to the past. And from such a perspective, it is indeed more than fitting that the contemporary American novels *Everything Is Illuminated* and *The History of Love* are, to a considerable extent, comic works: it is precisely the diverse and inherently comic manifestations of distance that mark this fiction as twenty-first century, Jewish American Holocaust writing of the third generation. In this fiction, the comic mode places the historical reality of the Holocaust at a distance, while at the same time this mode of representation is *itself* created and made possible by distance: the temporal, geographical, as well as cultural distance of America itself, including its distinct ethos and historical consciousness. In fact, with some conceptual and metaphorical license, the American ethos may, as a result of its utopian idealism, itself be considered as "comic." In any case, it is precisely such a correlation between American culture and the comic that is suggested by Michael Chabon in his Pulitzer Prize-winning *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*, which is a novel about *comics*. But on a more complex level, it is also a novel about what happens when America and its arguably comic perspective on life are confronted with the Holocaust.

Indeed, *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay* is a novel about the wonders of life in America as well as a celebration of comics and the opportunity for entertainment and escapism they offer. At the same time, though, these positive energies emanating from the novel collide with and are tempered by a profound and notably Americanized engagement with the Holocaust. As such, the central problem that motivates the novel is how an American perspective, or American life in all its characteristically American dimensions, can possibly make sense of and do justice to the profound horrors of the Holocaust. The novel tells the story of two cousins, Sammy Clay from Brooklyn, New York, and Joe Kavalier, who arrives in New York in 1939 as a refugee from Nazi-occupied Prague. By joining their individual talents of storytelling and drawing, the two

cousins manage to become an extremely successful pair of comic book artists. Their star character is a costumed superhero called the Escapist, whose existence is dedicated to fighting Hitler and the Nazis and to liberating those who are oppressed by them. Sammy and Joe make very good money, they both fall in love, and they even achieve a certain amount of fame; indeed, both of them would seem to be fully living the American Dream. Yet Joe, on whom my attention will focus in this analysis, is constantly troubled by a painful consciousness of what is going on in Europe: while he is safe in America, his family is still in Prague where he cannot keep them from Hitler's clutches.

In a multitude of ways, *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay* ceaselessly emphasizes and explores the unbridgeable distance between America—mid-twentieth century New York to be exact—and the events taking place in Europe before and during World War II. Chabon portrays life in America in the late thirties and early forties as a time when Americans were experiencing a golden age, including its "aetataureate delusion" (340):

> The rest of the world was busy feeding itself, country by country, to the furnace, but while the city's newspapers and newsreels at the Trans-Lux were filled with ill portents, defeats, atrocities, and alarms, the general mentality of the New Yorker was not one of siege, panic, or grim resignation to fate but rather the toe-wiggling, tea-sipping contentment of a woman curled on a sofa, reading in front of a fire with cold rain rattling against the windows. (340)

Indeed, while Europe descends into a maelstrom of increasingly tragic events, culminating in the deportation, murder, and genocide of six million Jews, in America, one might say, the comedy of Baudrillard's Utopia Achieved continues. And so, *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay* magnificently illustrates that American life and the Holocaust represent incommensurable regimes of experience and reality, and that the American position with regard to the tragic European events of the Holocaust is inevitably marked by a sense of comic displacement.

It is the fate of Joe Kavalier, refugee from Europe and successful comic book artist in America, to be part of both of these worlds, but to be truly at home in neither of them. Experiencing great difficulty in reconciling the tragic and the comic regimes, Joe continually gets trapped between them and continually tries to escape the entrapment. Fortunately, the various arts of "escapism" are Joe's trademark talent: he had been trained in Prague in the kind of escape artistry practiced by Harry Houdini, and while in America he becomes a producer and avid consumer of a unique-

ly American form of escapism—superhero comic books. From literal escapes—Houdiniesque breakouts, acts of sheer flight—to more metaphorical ones—comic books, falling in love—Joe's multiple feats of escape structure and keep in motion the novel's narrative. But "escapism" is an ambiguous activity in *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*. Joe's various escapes are not all equally successful or responsible. They can be life-saving and hopeful acts, like his escape from Europe, but they can also be desperate and life-denying: when Joe receives the news that the ship taking his younger brother to the US was torpedoed and sunk, he joins the army and leaves behind all his loved ones in New York, including his girlfriend Rosa (who, though unbeknown to Joe, is pregnant with his baby). Without ever sending a word, he does not return until a decade has passed. However, what is particularly significant about the *successful* instances of escapism in *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay* is this: intended to achieve delivery from harm, as well as release, relief, and entertainment, they can be seen as essentially comic feats that are thematically linked, moreover, to the American ethos. The most powerful manifestation of this symbolic confluence is Joe and Sammy's creation the Escapist: an archetypal, American comic book hero "whose power would be that of impossible and perpetual escape" (120). Moreover, through the Escapist, and in many other ways, the novel explores the effects and significance of escapism as a response to the Holocaust. This may be an unexpected and unusual response, but, Chabon cautiously suggests, there may be a way in which it also is a wholesome, and, moreover, a fundamentally American response. In what follows, I will demonstrate (some of) the ways in which the novel juxtaposes the comic and tragic realities of America and wartime Europe respectively, and consider the ways in which "escapism" offers both problematic as well as more meaningful ways of negotiating between them.

After a spectacular escape from Nazi-occupied Czechoslovakia, stowed away in a coffin together with another evacuee—the legendary Golem of Prague—Joe arrives in the US to find not only a safe haven, but also a land of endless opportunity. On Joe's first day in New York, after discovering that he can draw, Sammy takes Joe to see his boss Sheldon Anapol, a New York businessman, and cajoles the latter into hiring the cousins as creators of comic books. These quick successes seem almost unreal to the poor, hunted, and worn-out refugee Joe still is:

> [a]ll this conformed so closely to Joe's movie-derived notions of life in America that if an airplane were now to land on Twenty-fifth Street and

> disgorge a dozen bathing-suit-clad Fairies of Democracy come to award him the presidency of General Motors, a contract with Warner Bros., and a penthouse on Fifth Avenue with a swimming pool in the living room, he would have greeted this, too, with the same dreamlike unsurprise. (91)

At the same time, however, to actually live inside the American Dream and to be so far removed from the ever-darkening European reality is also deeply troubling to Joe. American newspaper and radio reports on the situation in Europe are scarce and highly elliptical and Joe finds out about the fate of his family only through incidental, censor-combed letters from his mother. The news of the death of his father reaches him by chance and, of all places, at the German consulate. Observing life in America, Joe comes to feel that it is almost as if the persecution of the Jews of Europe—of his family—might not even be happening. After the Escapist has violently molested Hitler and the Germans for some time, Anapol worries that they might get into trouble, which angers and upsets Joe. "'One of these days you're going to go too far,' Anapol said. … 'Somebody is going to get hurt.' 'Somebody is getting hurt already,' Joe reminded him. 'Well, not around here'" (172). And so, America, a Utopia Achieved, cut off from History, constitutes an escape from the tragic events taking place in Europe, but it is a fundamentally ambiguous escape: America's blissful distance to these events and its comic, carefree lifestyle are never far from appearing as careless ignorance.

These ambiguities of American distance manifest themselves in dramatic forms in Joe's personal life and career in the US. Though America is certainly more than kind to Joe, "[i]t was not that Joe felt at home in New York. That was something he never would have allowed himself to feel. But he was very grateful to his headquarters in exile" (167). Indeed, New York has brought him safety and, no less importantly, the city "had led him … to his calling, to this great, mad new American art form. She had laid at his feet the printing presses and lithography cameras and delivery vans that allowed him to fight, if not a genuine war, then a tolerable substitute. And she paid him handsomely for doing so: he already had seven thousand dollars—his family's ransom—in the bank" (167). Especially in the beginning, fighting Hitler through his comic books offered Joe a sense that he was doing something meaningful and useful. Indeed, fighting a "make-believe war against enemies he could not defeat, by a means that could never succeed—had offered the only possible salvation of his sanity" (285). It had offered an escape—even if that escape was tenuous or unreasonable. Later, when the war has begun, Joe is not only a successful and modestly wealthy comic book artist, but also involved in a passionate love

affair with a beautiful girl called Rosa Saks. By this time, he chooses not to read the last letter his mother would ever send him, included in the novel, in which she asks him not to feel guilty about his life in America, but to enjoy it and to build up a new life there. "Thus, just as his mother had begged him (though he did not know it), Joe had turned his thoughts from Prague, his family, the war" (325).

And yet, even though life in the US takes place a great distance from the horrific events unfolding in Europe, history cannot be kept at bay entirely. Indeed, the American Utopia Achieved is not a perfectly self-enclosed system; the escape is ever illusory, and therefore frustration continually lurks around the corner. No matter the warlike successes of the Escapist against the Nazis, in moments of desperation and frustration Joe cannot escape from the thought that "[t]he Escapist was an impossible champion, ludicrous and above all *imaginary*, fighting a war that could never be won. His cheeks burned with embarrassment. He was wasting his time" (168, italics in original). To lose himself in fighting imaginary wars or even to be wasting his time might not have been so bad if Joe had not had such high stakes in the wartime developments in Europe; but his family is still there, and he invests every spare penny he has in trying to get his brother over to America. In this war, however, a real one, escapism is no use: Joe's advances only lead to a "sense of *entrapment* in the toils of bureaucracy, of being powerless to help or free his family" (178, emphasis mine), and he painfully discovers "the impotence of [his] money, and of all the pent-up warlike fancies that had earned it" (177). And so, along with frustration come anger and rage, as "[t]he only people winning the war that Joe had been fighting in the pages of Empire Comics since January were Sheldon Anapol and Jack Ashkenazy. Between them, they had pocketed something in the neighborhood … of six hundred thousand dollars" (175). Like his own hero, Joe is a character involved in impossible and perpetual escape, yet whereas the Escapist safely roams the lands of illusion, Joe learns that the land of opportunity he has gotten to can also be a land of deceptions.

To overcome the frustrating limitations of living in America, of living at what is much *more* than an ocean's distance away from events in Europe, Joe embarks upon other forms of escapism. Fed up with the comedy of illusions staged by America, he, at several crucial moments, gives in to the desire to do "real" things—things that would make an actual difference. Yet these things tend to be desperate, stupid things, and they are not comic, but tragicomic at best. For that reason, perhaps, they are bound to fail, not least because, as I shall shortly demonstrate, the novel ultimately though cautiously favors American responses to the Holocaust that are

distanced, and therefore, in an important sense, comic responses. Joe starts picking fights, for instance, with Germans he randomly encounters in the city and only succeeds in getting hurt himself.[33] Much more damagingly, however, he joins the Navy after Pearl Harbor and leaves behind his girlfriend Rosa who is carrying his baby (though he does not know she is), not to return to America for more than a decade. This is another ill-fated escape: with a sardonic sense of irony, Chabon has Joe not go anywhere near the action in either Europe or the Pacific, but instead he stations him at a naval radio post in Antarctica. Here, things go terribly wrong. Asleep in their compound, the entire crew dies of carbon monoxide poisoning, except for Shannenhouse, the pilot, who was in the station's hangar, and Joe, who was spending the night with the dogs in the tunnels attached to—and heated from—the compound. With another instance of cruel irony, Joe—vicariously, (tragi)comically—experiences a true gas chamber, but manages to escape from it. Just after he emerges from the compound into the cold, fresh air, he has a vision of his old magic teacher, Bernard Kornblum, approaching him. "Kornblum knelt, rolled Joe over onto his back, and gazed down at him, his expression critical and amused. '*Escapistry*,' he said, with his usual scorn" (451, italics in original).

After the war, Joe finds out that none of his family survived Hitler. For the next decade, he struggles and fails to reconcile the reality of the Holocaust and the loss of his family in it with the distance that his escape from Europe and subsequent life in America placed between him and his family's horrific fate. Ultimately, however, the novel seems to propose that an ambiguously appropriate and pragmatically effective way of approaching the memory of the Holocaust inheres precisely in the American distance to these events and in the comedy of the ever inadequate escapism offered by America's characteristic modes of representation and signification. Thus, having embarked on numerous forms of escapism in the course of his eventful life—flights for life as well as flights of fancy—Joe gradually and not without numerous setbacks learns that the most sustaining form of escapism is offered by the magic of the imagination. And for him, this is found most wonderfully in

33 For some time, Joe starts going into Yorkville every day in order to look for trouble: this is a part of Manhattan that traditionally was home to a considerable number of German immigrants. One day, he breaks into the office of the "Aryan-American League," which turns out to be an unimpressive, little-used premises. While Joe is thrashing the place, its occupant, Carl Ebling, walks in and they get into a scuffle that will have some nasty future consequences. Further in the novel, Ebling radicalizes and commits several terrorist acts, two of which are aimed directly at Joe Kavalier. Meanwhile, Chabon offers an uncannily insightful portrait of the career of a "lone wolf" terrorist that resonates strongly in an early twenty-first century context.

superhero comic books. Around the summer of 1941, when the Escapist has been going at the Nazis for almost two years, yet "Adolf Hitler's empire was more extensive than Bonaparte's" (318), the aesthetics of Joe's work change. Under the influence of his love for Rosa, the work of American Surrealists he is introduced to, and, more than anything else, Orson Welles' *Citizen Kane*, his attention shifts away from fighting Hitler toward exploring the possibilities of his art form. "Suddenly the standard three tiers of quadrangular panels became a prison from which he had to *escape*" (319, emphasis mine). Soon he and Sammy would produce, as Chabon's narrator historicizes, "the first of the so-called modernist or prismatic Escapist stories" (363). This time, and to Sammy's great surprise, Joe agrees with Anapol in laying off the Nazis for a while. As Joe explains, "I'm tired of fighting, maybe, for a little while. I fight, and I am fighting some more, and it just makes me have *less* hope, not more. I need to do something... something that will be *great*, you know, instead of trying always to be Good" (367, italics in original). In art itself, Joe has found a form of escape that is much more potent than an imaginary war against Hitler.

In fact, it is precisely the power of art—the art of American comic books no less—that plays a crucial part in Joe working through his wartime traumas, including the death of his entire family in the Holocaust. Many years after the war, Joe finally returns to New York, but rather than returning to his family and friends, he locks himself up in a room in the Empire State Building where he for four years works upon a huge work of comic book art entitled *The Golem*. He "came to feel that the work—telling this story—was helping to heal him. All of the grief and black wonder that he was never able to express, before or afterward, … all of it went into the queasy angles and stark compositions, the cross-hatchings and vast swaths of shadow, the distended and fractured and finely minced panels of his monstrous comic book" (577–8). What is particularly striking, even iconoclastic and impious about *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*, then, is that Chabon offers an apology for comic books and the escapism they make possible not just for their own sake, but precisely for their artistic as well as their therapeutic value in responding to the Holocaust:

> Having lost his mother, father, brother, and grandfather, the friends and foes of his youth, his beloved teacher Bernard Kornblum, his city, his history—his home—the usual charge leveled against comic books, that they offered *merely an easy escape from reality*, seemed to Joe actually to be a powerful argument on their behalf. … The escape from reality was, he felt—especially right after the war—a worthy challenge. (575)

From the perspective of traditional Holocaust literary criticism, this is a point hard or even impossible to swallow. Alan Berger, for instance, concludes an essay on *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay* with a strong claim, the import of which is hard to miss: "there are two unhappy results of escapism. The first is that one cannot escape the Holocaust any more than one can escape the impact of Rome's destruction of the Jerusalem Temple. Second, escapism leads to forgetting. And forgetting is the ultimate form of Holocaust denial."[34] In the eyes of this critic, Chabon clearly has transgressed; he even seems to be close to that ultimate, blasphemous sin of Holocaust denial. Yet it appears to me that Berger is missing, on a fundamental level, a crucial point Chabon's novel tries to make and which has, in fact, been formulated much more perceptively by Lee Behlman: "Chabon's novel explores a major moral and aesthetic issue … : the fact that fantasy itself … can give pleasure to an artist and an audience, and that pleasure may be a distraction from the past. What's more, and this is where Chabon is most surprising, his novel guardedly presents the idea that that distraction may itself be a valid response."[35]

In order to appreciate the novel's engagement with the Holocaust, it is crucial to understand that it approaches this history openly as well as inevitably in contemporary and American ways and that such an approach has distinct consequences. Indeed, *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay* does not employ the exceptionalist, tragic frameworks in which the Holocaust tends to be recounted. Instead, it offers a Holocaust-inflected narrative that is characterized precisely by its distanced or displaced approach to the Holocaust and its inclusion of distinctly comic and hopeful touches. Though critics of Holocaust literature might consider this contemporary American distance a shortcoming, reading the novel on its own terms allows us to appreciate that Chabon has in fact unabashedly tried to put his distanced twenty-first century American perspective to his advantage. Whereas this may be considered impious on the meta-level of traditional Holocaust thought, Chabon is at pains to show that his approach has more than sufficient moral validity. "Although all the world … viewed them as trash, Joe loved his comic books. … Comic books had sustained his sanity during his time on the psychiatric ward at Gitmo" (574–5). What could possibly be wrong with such a response, Chabon seems to ask. And even more strongly, his narrator comments that "[i]t was a mark of how

34 Alan L. Berger, "Michael Chabon's *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay: The Return of the Golem*," *Studies in American Jewish Literature* 29 (2010): 88, doi: 10.1353/ajl.2010.0004.

35 Behlman, "The Escapist," 62.

fucked-up and broken was the world—the reality—that had swallowed [Joes's] home and his family that such a feat of escape, by no means easy to pull off, should remain so universally despised" (576). The novel's engagement with the Holocaust constantly draws attention to—and challenges and problematizes—the dynamics of American popular culture, but ultimately, Chabon allows them to remain standing, if usefully shot through with holes of irony. In fact, Chabon emphatically *needs* them to survive in order to show, not how escapism leads to forgetting—though that risk remains—but rather, "in a phenomenological way, how fantasy feels, and how it may assuage pain," as Behlman puts it.[36]

At one point in the novel, when Sammy makes a comment that reflects the disdain with which comic books generally tend to be regarded, Rosa retorts by saying that "[n]o medium is inherently better than any other. … It's all in what you do with it" (363). This statement seems to reflect not only the novel's attitude toward popular culture, but also toward the poetics of representing the Holocaust. With *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*, Chabon tries to show, quite successfully, that a novel that celebrates and makes intensive use itself of the (conventionalized) formats of American popular culture can still tell a significant, complex, accomplished, and profound story about the Holocaust, and be highly entertaining at the same time. By extension, all the third generation Jewish American fiction about the Holocaust discussed in this chapter bears witness to the idea that there is no one, superior mode of (fictional) writing about the Holocaust and that the traditional "limits of representation" with regard to the Holocaust are eminently elastic. Through a variety of thematic and formal devices, which I have sought to capture under the idea of the dynamic of distance, each of these texts forwards and extensively reflects on its own distance to the Holocaust. Significantly, this distance consists of both temporal and spatial dimensions as well as a more metaphorical one: American culture itself. Separated from the events of the Holocaust by an ocean and the passing of more than fifty years, this writing tends to respond to the Holocaust indirectly and in ways that are highly mediated, and notably Americanized. Thus, it normalizes fictional writing about the Holocaust precisely by choosing playful and impious modes of representing the Holocaust, especially the comic mode. In such ways, Englander, Foer, Krauss, and Chabon, respond to the Holocaust highly originally, as well as in ways that are characteristic of their own unique, cultural, and historical perspectives. In line with Rosa's statement, moreover, they shed

36 Ibid., 62.

new light on the idea of the limits of representation with regard to the Holocaust by demonstrating, each in their own ways, that the *possibilities* of representation are well-nigh limitless.

Yet to emphasize the infinite possibilities rather than the limits of representation is not to suggest that "anything goes." It is to say, however, that representation is ultimately a matter of relating to the past from a particular cultural, historical, and geographical perspective, and that the possible perspectives are indeed limitless. Reading Holocaust literature, then, is less a matter of policing any supposedly "objective" limits of representation, but of understanding the kinds of relationships to the Holocaust that literary representations produce, and the terms on which these relationships operate. This is to recognize that the memory and the meaning of the Holocaust are not set in stone, but are subject to constant revision, reinterpretation, and revaluation—a process which will take shape in different ways in different times and in different parts of the world. Far from this posing a threat to the memory of the Holocaust, however, it is in fact the only way in which this history is able to remain a meaningful cultural memory at all.

From such a perspective, what is significant about the literary engagements with the memory of the Holocaust that this study is concerned with is not only that they are very much contemporary and American. In fact, they are also eminently Jewish: from Englander's and Foer's fascination with an Eastern European "vanished world" and its Yiddish story-telling tradition, to the consciously lived, though very flexible Jewish identities of Krauss's Alma and Bird, to Chabon's obsession with the Golem.[37] In fact, as they engage with the memory of the Holocaust, each of these authors in various ways explores the continuing significance of Jewish culture inside American culture—or rather, in symbiosis with American culture. It is this relationship between the Holocaust and a simultaneously Jewish and American culture and identity that is the subject of the next part.

37 The phrase "a vanished world" was used, of course, by the photographer Roman Vishniac, who beautifully captured Jewish life in Eastern Europe at the brink of World War II in his *A Vanished World* (Amsterdam: Meulenhoff/Landshoff, 1986).

PART II

IDENTITY

4

"The Only Common Denominator"

Jewish American Identity and the Holocaust

Though they represent characteristically twenty-first century attitudes and approaches to the Holocaust, the fiction of Nathan Englander, Jonathan Safran Foer, Nicole Krauss, and Michael Chabon are part of a well-established tradition of American responses to this history. In fact, since the 1970s, the Holocaust has become a virtually unavoidable presence in American life. These last four decades have witnessed the release of numerous literary works and blockbuster Hollywood films about the Holocaust, the veneration of Holocaust survivors as celebrities and heroes, as well as the organization of Holocaust tourism. But the memory of the Holocaust has also manifested itself in more lasting forms: Holocaust memorials have been erected in practically every self-respecting larger American city, Holocaust curricula have been established at all levels of education, and numerous high-profile Holocaust museums and memorial centers have opened across the US, with the US Holocaust Memorial Museum, right on the Mall in Washington D.C., serving as the most significant one. Clearly, the Americanization of the Holocaust has had some very visible and tangible consequences. Yet the material presence of Holocaust memory also seems to bear significant *in*tangible consequences: this history could only become omnipresent because it has in fact become part of American *culture*, because, through the same process of Americanization, it has become an *American* history that matters to Americans and holds meaning to them.

For obvious reasons, though, it is to Jewish Americans that the memory of the Holocaust is most significant. In fact, the memory of the Holocaust functions ever more as the most salient "Jewish" public issue beside Israel.[1]

1 Peter Novick calls it "a commonplace" that "Israel and the Holocaust are the twin pillars of American Jewish 'civil religion.'" *The Holocaust and Collective Memory:*

As Peter Novick amply illustrates in his study *The Holocaust and Collective Memory*, American Jews appear as the most important authors, producers, initiators, organizers, consumers, and, not insignificantly, funders of the various Holocaust-related activities mentioned. Also, large-scale qualitative research of the Jewish American population further evidences the centrality of the Holocaust in Jewish American life. When the American Jewish Committee asked respondents to the "2005 Annual Survey of American Jewish Opinion" to rate the importance of a number of activities to their Jewish identities, "remembrance of the Holocaust" was rated as "extremely important" by 25 percent and as "very important" by 58 percent of respondents. This was a considerably higher score than on any of the other activities, which included participation in synagogue services, Jewish study, travel to Israel, Jewish organizational activity, and celebration of Jewish holidays.[2] Similarly, in their book *Saving Remnants: Feeling Jewish in America*, Sara Bershtel and Allen Graubard note that in their interviews with hundreds of ordinary Jewish Americans, "[w]hat surfaces over and over again in … speculations on Jewish vulnerability is the image of the Holocaust." On the basis of these interviews, Bershtel and Graubard conclude that "for many Jews, what remains most vivid and 'ethnically' alive is the Holocaust," and that, indeed, "the Holocaust exerts a strong emotional force for Jewish identification."[3]

As the memory of the Holocaust is both a pervasive and a significant presence among Jewish Americans, there seems little reason to doubt the many scholars who assert the centrality of the Holocaust to Jewish American *identity*. As Peter Novick points out, (collective) memory and identity exist in a "circular relationship. We choose to center certain memories because they seem to us to express what is central to our collective identity. Those memories, once brought to the fore, reinforce that form of identity.

The American Experience (London: Bloomsbury, 2001), 146. On the history of Jewish American interest in the Holocaust, see, in addition to Novick's study, Michael Berenbaum, "The Situation of the American Jew," chap. 13 in *After Tragedy and Triumph: Modern Jewish Thought and the American Experience* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Alan Mintz, "From Silence to Salience," chap. 1 in *Popular Culture and the Shaping of Holocaust Memory in America* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2001); Hasia R. Diner, *We Remember with Reverence and Love: American Jews and the Myth of Silence after the Holocaust, 1945–1962* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2009).

2 "2005 Annual Survey of American Jewish Opinion - Jewish Identity (6/7)," American Jewish Committee, December 20, 2005, http://www.ajc.org/site/apps/nl/content3.asp?c=ijITI2PHKoG&b=846741&ct=1740391.

3 Sara Bershtel and Allen Graubard, *Saving Remnants: Feeling Jewish in America* (New York: The Free Press, 1992), 79, 118, 120.

And so it has been with the Holocaust and American Jewry."[4] In other words, Jewish American interest in the Holocaust and Jewish American identity mutually affect and sustain each other. As a result, Novick argues, "the Holocaust has, in recent decades, moved from the margins to the center of how American Jews understand themselves and how they represent themselves to others" (201). This trend has in fact been so strong that Novick even speaks of "a Holocaust-centered Jewish identity" (188).

However, it is precisely this idea of a Jewish identity in one way or another centered on the Holocaust that gives rise to a considerable amount of concern, unease, and resistance among many critics. In fact, such a form of Jewish identity is often eagerly discredited and dismissed. The literary scholar Andrew Furman, for instance, suggests that "[i]f the rampant assimilation of Jewish Americans tells us anything, it tells us that a viable Jewish American identity cannot be rooted solely or even largely in Holocaust remembrance and Zionism."[5] In a similar vein, Sara Bershtel and Allen Graubard insist that "remembrance of the tragedy cannot serve as a stand-in for a live ethnic culture."[6] But perhaps the most sustained and comprehensive criticism comes from religious Jews who feel that only Judaism, not the history of the destruction of the European Jews, can function as a lasting basis for Jewish identity.[7]

Though the very idea of a Holocaust-centered identity inspires strong feelings of resistance among many critics, it is at the same time not very clear how exactly such an identity might work on an individual level. Even Novick's work is not very illuminating in this respect. Though Novick claims in the introduction of his book that American Jewry has put "the Holocaust at the center of its *self*-understanding and *self*-representation" (5, emphasis mine), his later analyses do not reveal much about the function of the Holocaust in relation to Jewish self-understanding or self-representation, and are in fact hardly concerned with that issue. Instead, Novick describes how American Jews have used the memory of the Holocaust as a means of distinguishing Jews from *other* Americans. Thus, he argues that in an age when traditional pillars of American Jewry—religion, immigrant background, political orientation, views on Israel—have lost their ability

4 Novick, *The Holocaust and Collective Memory*, 7. Hereafter cited in the text.

5 Andrew Furman, *Contemporary Jewish American Writers and the Multicultural Dilemma: The Return of the Exiled* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2000), 72.

6 Bershtel and Graubard, *Saving Remnants*, 119.

7 See for instance Michael Goldberg, *Why Should Jews Survive: Looking Past the Holocaust Toward a Jewish Future* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

to unite or even mobilize Jews, the Holocaust emerges "as virtually the only common denominator of American Jewish identity in the late twentieth century," and thus "has filled a need for a consensual symbol" (7). But the type of identity Novick discusses is a collective Jewish American identity in which the prime actors are Jewish leaders and organizations rather than private individuals, an identity that is mobilized and given shape in the public arena of identity politics rather that in the private home. Novick notes that "[w]hen it comes to how American Jews represent themselves to others, there is no question but that the Holocaust is at the center of that representation" (202). Yet by this time, he is also forced to admit that "[s]o far as self-understanding is concerned, there's no way of knowing just how many American Jews, and which American Jews, ground their Jewish identity in the Holocaust, but the number appears to be large. … [N]o one can specify with any specificity the breadth and depth of Holocaust-based Jewish identity" (201–202).[8]

Though Novick may well be right in saying that it is impossible to know exactly how many people base their Jewish identities on the Holocaust, it seems to me that the more important question is not about numbers but about nature and quality: the question of what it means to ground one's Jewish identity in the Holocaust. Much criticism has felt disinclined to take such a form of identity very seriously, preferring to dismiss it as inconsequential or objectionable. I would contend, however, that the centrality of the Holocaust to Jewish American identity presents not a distraction from but in fact a challenge to understanding such an identity. Indeed, a thorough and sophisticated account of how this memory affects Jewish American identity is indispensable to an appreciation of the workings of Jewish American identity more generally. In this respect, however, it is essential not to consider the centrality of the Holocaust in Jewish American life in isolation, cut off from other factors that shape Jewish American identity. Instead, a proper appraisal of the significance of the Holocaust's centrality in the lives of American Jews can only be achieved by relating it to the multitudinous and variegated ways in which (Jewish) identity formation takes place in the contemporary US. The reason for this is that the emergence of the Holocaust as a central element to Jewish American identity does not appear out of thin air, but coincides with—or is the result of—radical

8 But, Novick adds, "we can note the hundreds of millions of dollars American Jews have contributed to Holocaust-related projects, the way they turn out for Holocaust-related events as for no others, the continuing high demand for scholarly (and not-so-scholarly) books on the Holocaust—greater than for books on any other Jewish subject" (202).

changes in (Jewish) American identity formation in the postwar period. As a consequence of these changes, Jewish American identity is expressed ever more freely and variously, according to individual preferences, and in increasingly smooth interaction with other elements of identity. The result is not that the memory of the Holocaust remains as the *only* dimension through which people feel Jewish, but rather as the most widely shared and commonly valued element among a large variety of American Jews with very different kinds of Jewish identities.[9] As such, the memory of the Holocaust in fact offers not only one means of being Jewish, but precisely one of being American at the same time. Through this more sophisticated understanding of the interaction between Jewish American identity and Holocaust memory, it is possible to envisage ways in which a Jewish American identity centered on the Holocaust can both be viable and meaningful.

Jews Become White Folks; White Folks Become Ethnic

The increasing significance of the Holocaust to American Jews in the latter decades of the twentieth century and the development of a Holocaust-centered identity were made possible by two key socio-historical developments. The first of these is the widely-acknowledged fact that, since the end of World War II, "Jews became white folks," as Karen Brodkin has memorably put it.[10] That is to say, Jews moved from a relatively marginalized position in society into the privileged, white American mainstream.[11] Before the war, Jews in America certainly did not experience the extent of exclusion, marginalization, and persecution that was their brethren's part in Europe. Still, they had for generations taken up a position of outsiders. For instance, well into the twentieth century, formal and informal quotas

9 Indeed, in an important sense, it is quite misguided to speak of Jewish American identity in the singular. There is not today, and there never was in the past, one single, coherent, and shared sense of a collective Jewish American identity. Instead, there are multiple and diverse as well as overlapping and conflicting Jewish American identit*ies*.

10 Karen Brodkin, *How Jews Became White Folks & What that Says about Race in America* (New Brunswick, New Jersey, and London: Rutgers University Press, 1998). On the "whitening" of American Jews, see also Eric L. Goldstein, *The Price of Whiteness: Jews, Race, and American Identity* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2006). Adding a layer of nuance, Goldstein does not frame his book "as a study of how Jews *became* white, but as one that explores how Jews *negotiated* their place in a complex racial world where Jewishness, whiteness, and blackness have all made significant claims on them" (5, italics in original).

11 I write "relatively marginalized," because Jews in America have not suffered the extent of marginalization that has been the fate of African Americans, Native Americans, and other "peoples of color."

were maintained to limit or prohibit Jews' access to various jobs and professions, enrolment in universities, membership to exclusive clubs, or settlement in certain areas.[12] And during the 1930s, at the time when Hitler was building his Third Reich, America even witnessed a burst of virulent anti-Semitism. Yet in the decades after World War II, American Jews for a variety of reasons experienced unprecedented and spectacular upward socio-economic and cultural mobility. As Seymour Lipset and Earl Raab put it, American Jews "have been able to become the best educated, the most middle-class, and, ultimately, the most affluent ethnoreligious group in the country."[13]

Yet the great postwar successes and achievements of Jews in American society had significant effects on the nature of American Jews' identity. Greater acceptance by American society and the simultaneous decline of anti-Semitism went hand in hand with increasing degrees of assimilation, accompanied by steeply rising rates of intermarriage.[14] The latter, especially, is generally perceived as the nail in the coffin of Jewish life and community in America. And so, Lipset and Raab, after taking into account numerous survey results and statistics, conclude that "group identity and cohesiveness are severely eroding for the large majority" and suggest that "America's historical openness may be seen as a double-edged sword, hacking away at disadvantage, and on the backstroke, cutting away at identity, Jewish or otherwise."[15]

It is significant, however, that here and throughout their book, Lipset and Raab consider Jewish identity exclusively in terms of group identity, enabled by communal cohesion and experience. They prefer to speak of minority groups in America in terms of tribal rather than ethnic groups and suggest that "[l]ife in America presents each group with a tribal dilemma in the form of an antagonism between individualism … and group identity. … In the ensuing conflict, tribal cohesion tends to lose out. … Identification with the tribe no longer provides members with a life meaning that can compete with the fruits of individual accomplishment."[16] Yet by

12 Karen Brodkin, *How Jews Became White Folks*, 33, 47.

13 Seymour M. Lipset and Earl Raab, *Jews and the New American Scene* (Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 1995), 27.

14 According to the National Jewish Population Survey 2000–01, the current rate of intermarriage among American Jews is a staggering 47 %. United Jewish Communities, *The National Jewish Population Survey 2000–01: Strength, Challenge and Diversity in the American Jewish Population*, September 2003, updated January 2004, http://www.jewishfederations.org/local_includes/downloads/4606.pdf, 16.

15 Lipset and Raab, *Jews and the New American Scene*, 47.

16 Ibid., 7.

viewing Jewishness exclusively as a group or "tribal" experience, beset by a "tribal dilemma," Lipset and Raab turn the issue of being Jewish in America into a zero-sum game whereby American individualism trumps communalism, including Jewishness. But, one might ask, *is* American individualism really antithetical to Jewishness and are there no ways in which one can reap the fruits of American individualism *and* be Jewish at the same time? In fact, a broader survey of the topic indicates that reality is more complicated than Lipset and Raab suggest, but it also does not seem quite as bleak. Indeed, as Charles E. Silberman writes, "[t]he openness of American society has created a whole new set of options for American Jews, who can now express their Jewishness in a wide variety of ways without surrendering their full participation in American life."[17] More strongly even, it seems that, in the postwar period, Jewish identity and American identity, far from being at loggerheads, increasingly have been mutually reinforcing each other.

This brings me to the second important socio-historical development I wish to identify: not only did Jews become white folks in the period after World War II, but white folks became "ethnic" (or remained ethnic), seemingly reversing the old American adage of "e pluribus unum." Indeed, since the very inception of the nation, assimilation of immigrants from diverse backgrounds had been the professed ideology in America, popularized in the twentieth century especially through the image of the melting pot. Dominant sociological theories such as "melting pot theory" and "straight line theory" had predicted that because immigration from Europe to the United States had been largely cut off in the 1920s, the European ethnicities would gradually die out as each generation of the original immigrants' descendants became more and more "Americanized."[18] However, in the course of the 1960s and 70s, sociologists like Nathan Glazer and Daniel Patrick Moynihan, Michael Novak, and Andrew Greeley discovered that among the often highly successful descendents of European immigrants, some degree of ethnicity persisted. In *Beyond the Melting Pot*, for instance, Glazer and Moynihan famously asserted that "[t]he point about the melting pot is that it did not happen."[19] *Beyond*

17 Charles E. Silberman, *A Certain People: American Jews and Their Lives Today* (New York: Summit, 1985), 226.

18 Herbert J. Gans, "Symbolic Ethnicity: The Future of Ethnic Groups and Cultures in America," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 2, no. 1 (1979): 2.

19 Nathan Glazer and Daniel Patrick Moynihan, *Beyond the Melting Pot: The Negroes, Puerto Ricans, Jews, Italians, and Irish of New York City* (Cambridge, MA: The M.I.T. Press, 1968), 290; See also: Andrew M. Greeley, *Why Can't They Be Like*

the Melting Pot proved to be a seminal work, giving birth to a large and diverse body of scholarship on ethnicity in America, where some of the extremes were represented by scholars who argued that an ethnic revival was underway and those who felt that much of the ethnic activity going on was fairly superficial and only of a symbolic significance.[20] Though the exact nature and persistence of ethnicity along with the issues of identity politics and multiculturalism remain topics of dissension, the very fact of the "new ethnicity" has been generally accepted and can be widely observed—from the "roots phenomenon," to the popularity of ethnic festivals, or even the obsession with hyphenation.[21] As newly established "white folks," American Jews took an active part in this ethnic turn, expressing Jewishness—traditionally a simultaneously ethnic as well as religious identity—in ways that might be considered more strongly ethnic than religious.[22]

It is precisely in such a context that the growing Jewish American interest in the Holocaust since the 1970s and the development of a Holocaust-centered Jewish identity must be situated historically. As Peter Novick has demonstrated at length, in a period when Jews were more at ease in American society than ever before, leading to increasing and accelerated assimilation, "a shift in strategic priorities from 'integration' to 'survival'" took shape among American Jews.[23] Jewish leaders around this time were not only concerned about the rising rates of intermarriage and assimilation, but ironically they also discerned the rise of a new anti-Semitism, for which they felt American Jews were ill-prepared. Though these fears of a new anti-Semitism were mostly unjustified, as Novick points out, "[n]ow, increasingly, American Jews came to see themselves as an endan-

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Us? America's White Ethnic Groups (New York: Dutton, 1971); Michael Novak, *The Rise of the Unmeltable Ethnics: Politics and Culture in the Seventies* (New York: Macmillan, 1971).

20 Richard Alba offers a useful discussion and overview of the various theories of ethnicity and ethnic identity which were formulated in the 1960s and 70s to explain the persistence of ethnicity among whites. Richard D. Alba, *Ethnic Identity: The Transformation of White America* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1990), 16–30.

21 Though the emergence of the "new ethnicity" is closely related to identity politics and multiculturalism, it must not be conflated with either of them. A useful way of distinguishing between them is to locate the new ethnicity in the (semi-)private realm of life and identity politics and multiculturalism in the public, politicized realm. Of course, since the private and public cannot be entirely separated, this remains an imperfect distinction.

22 Bershtel and Graubard, *Saving Remnants*, 100–101.

23 Novick, *The Holocaust and Collective Memory*, 184. Hereafter cited in the text.

gered species, and searched for themes and programs that could promote Jewish solidarity and stem the hemorrhage of assimilation and intermarriage" (171). Thus, the memory of the Holocaust was fostered for being uniquely equipped to bolster a crumbling sense of Jewishness. Indeed, at this point, it was the "Holocaust [that] looked like the one item in stock with consumer appeal. … Whereas other Jewish activities tended to attract those who already had a fairly high degree of Jewish commitment, programs related to the Holocaust showed a capacity to pull in Jews with an otherwise marginal Jewish identity" (187–188).

At the same time, Novick demonstrates that the success of this increased centering on the Holocaust among American Jews is closely related to another significant trend taking place around this time in American culture more generally: the emergence and celebration of various victim identities. After the optimistic and future-oriented 1940s and 50s made way for the 1960s and 70s, the American cultural mood changed considerably as a result of various historical developments, notably the Vietnam War. Also, American standing in the world suffered considerable erosion. As a result, people increasingly relinquished their "all-American" identities in favor of identifying with smaller communities—women, gays, Blacks, Jews, etcetera—that were often grounded in shared histories of victimization (189). In this context, the social status of the victim changed considerably: from a label that was previously shunned, it turned into a form of identity that was increasingly looked upon with sympathy (190). As Novick points out, "[i]t was against this background, and in this cultural climate that virtually celebrated victimhood, that efforts to firm up faltering Jewish identity were mounted" (190).[24] And so, in a period when American Jews were increasingly alienated from traditional forms of Jewish identity, the history of the Holocaust not only offered a relatively undemanding basis for Jewish identity, but also one that was socially and culturally very attractive in the larger American context.

24 Significantly, however, Novick immediately adds:

> [i]t is not that Jewish leaders deliberately and opportunistically latched on to a fashionable victimhood as the basis for an identity that could mobilize Jews and ensure Jewish continuity. … Rather, the heightened status of the victim removed inhibitions that had in previous decades led them to shun the label. The 'culture of victimization' didn't *cause* Jews to embrace a victim identity based on the Holocaust; it *allowed* this sort of identity to become dominant, because it was, after, virtually the only one that could encompass those Jews whose faltering Jewish identity produced so much anxiety about Jewish survival. (190, italics in original)

In order to better understand, however, the nature and function of a Jewish identity centered on the Holocaust, it is important to emphasize that the very nature and function of the new, "post-melting pot" ethnicity, on which this particular form of Jewish identity builds, differs in fundamental ways from older forms of ethnicity.

Ethnic Identity in Postwar America

As Richard Alba points out, American sociology had traditionally viewed ethnicity from a Weberian perspective that emphasized the dynamics within and between social *groups*.[25] Ethnicity was important to the members of an ethnic group because it structured and gave meaning to a person's life and relations within and beyond the group; it offered a distinct type of "imagined community," as Benedict Anderson would have it. As a form of "social solidarity," ethnicity reinforced cohesion and purposefulness within the group through various social structures—organizations, associations, religious congregations; and as a principle of "social allocation," it determined group members' level of education, their occupation, and place of residence in the wider society.[26] Indeed, ethnicity tended to be associated with working class, immigrant milieus—places with considerable cultural and socio-economic homogeneity, like the Little Italies of many urban areas. However, as a result of a halted influx of immigrants and the upward mobility of white ethnics—an experience which befell not only the Jews—both the principle of social allocation and of social solidarity became considerably less important dimensions of ethnicity in the period since World War II. In fact, Alba notes,

> [i]t can no longer be assumed that ethnic solidarities within the white population are sustained by salient correspondences between ethnicity and labor-market situation or by extensive patterns of informal association. Insofar as ethnicity has a role, then, it is increasingly voluntary, dependent on deliberate actions of individuals to maintain activities and relationships that have an ethnic character.[27]

From a dimension of life principally concerned with being part of a group and to be taken for granted, ethnicity had become a matter of what Alba calls "ethnic identity," that is, "a person's subjective orientation toward

25 Alba, *Ethnic Identity*, 16.
26 Ibid., 17.
27 Ibid., 20.

his or her ethnic origins," shaped by personal choices rather than external factors.[28]

One of the most influential conceptualizations of such ethnic identity was offered by Herbert J. Gans when he introduced the concept of "symbolic ethnicity" in a 1979 article. Skeptical about the then popular notion that a full-blown ethnic revival was taking place among white ethnics, Gans argued that "acculturation and assimilation continue to take place among third and fourth generation ethnics," and that the contemporary burst of activities being taken for ethnic revival must really be seen as a "symbolic ethnicity, an ethnicity of last resort."[29] According to Gans, the third and later generation descendants of European immigrants have become assimilated to such an extent that the ethnic cultures of their grandparents have no real function in their everyday lives. In fact, "people are less and less interested in their ethnic cultures and organizations … and are instead more concerned with maintaining their ethnic *identity*, with the *feeling* of being Jewish, or Italian, or Polish, and with finding ways of feeling and expressing that identity in suitable ways" (7, emphasis mine). Ethnicity is no longer a given but a choice made to give expression to an individual identity—a choice that does not require profound knowledge of the ethnic culture one chooses to identify with. Consequently, "most people look for easy and intermittent ways of expressing their identity, for ways that do not conflict with other ways of life" (8). And "[b]ecause people's concern is with identity, rather than with cultural practices or group relationships, they are free to look for ways of expressing that identity which suit them best, thus opening up the possibility of voluntary, diverse or individualistic ethnicity" (8–9). In the process, the "functions of ethnic cultures and groups diminish" and "ethnicity takes on an expressive rather than instrumental function in people's lives" (9). Indeed, it becomes a "leisure-time activity" that is expressed primarily through symbols—hence, *symbolic* ethnicity—such as ceremonial rites of passage, holidays, and consumer goods. Though Gans does not seem to hold symbolic ethnicity in high regard, he expects that it may persist for another few generations. Ultimately though, he predicts, assimilation will run its course and even the symbols of ethnicity will lose their significance and "the secular trend of straight-line theory will hit very close to zero, and the basic postulates of the theory will turn out to have been accurate" (18).

28 Ibid., 25.

29 Herbert J. Gans, "Symbolic Ethnicity," 1. Hereafter cited in the text.

It is easy to see how the Holocaust would fit into a new form of Jewish identity based on the model suggested by Gans. After the more pervasive and demanding group-based forms of Jewish identity—be they religious, secular, or both—lost their hold on and attraction to the majority of Jews in the postwar period, the Holocaust offered a very attractive alternative means by which to maintain and express one's sense of Jewishness. After all, the Holocaust not only represents an extremely powerful, evocative, and broadly respected Jewish symbol, but it also appears to offer a relatively undemanding way to maintain a Jewish identity. This is by no means to trivialize or downplay the actual horror of the Holocaust, but merely to indicate that a Holocaust-centered form of symbolic identity seems to require no more than occasionally reading a book or watching a movie about the Holocaust. It is not unthinkable that for many Jews, their (Holocaust-centered) Jewish identity amounts to no more than doing just that. Consequently, it is understandable that such a form Jewish identity is often not highly valued, as it seems rather non-committal and bland. However, analyzing a Jewish identity centered on the Holocaust (or any other form of "post-melting pot ethnicity") through the model of symbolic ethnicity does present two considerable problems: first, the theory of symbolic ethnicity offers a highly abstracted account of how people construct their ethnic identities, but does not consider the irreducibly personal significance of such identities to the people who live them. As such, it rather simplifies reality. Second, it appreciates insufficiently that symbolic ethnicity is less an impoverished form of ethnicity than a classic reincarnation of American individualism, allowing free and unhampered self-invention and self-fashioning, but at the same time also a sense of (self-chosen) community.

It is precisely these problems that Mary C. Waters' *Ethnic Options: Choosing Identities in America* seeks to remedy by considering much more explicitly and in much more detail the individual dimension of ethnicity.[30] Based on in-depth interviews with between 50 and 100 carefully selected white ethnics of various ancestries, Waters' study intends to achieve a better understanding of "the meaning or lack of meaning of ethnicity to people in the last stages of assimilation" (12). One interesting dimension of Waters' book is that it generally confirms Gans's thesis about the *workings* of symbolic ethnicity, but also adds considerable nuance and complexity to it in terms of understanding its *significance* to individuals.[31] As to be ex-

30 Mary C. Waters, *Ethnic Options: Choosing Identities in America* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and Oxford: University of California Press, 1990). Hereafter cited in the text.

31 Another important dimension of Waters' book that is less central to my concern in this chapter is its critique of symbolic ethnicity for the ways in which it may cause

pected, *Ethnic Options* repeatedly emphasizes the optional nature of ethnic identities, presenting "case after case of people sorting and sifting among ethnic categories for their own identities and to decide about the identities of others," and illustrating how "[e]thnicity is increasingly a matter of personal preference" (89). Waters confirms Gans's and Alba's claim that symbolic ethnicity is generally quite superficial, but she goes to lengths to dispute the popular idea that it also meaningless. She argues that "[t]he fact that ethnic identification is increasingly voluntary does not mean that it lacks meaning or that it will necessarily disappear quickly with the passage of time. My respondents felt that having an ethnicity was, if not essential to their self-identity, a valuable and worthwhile attribute" (90). On the one hand, the *practices* of (symbolic) ethnicity offer a sense of community and connectedness, which, Waters discovered, is experienced on the level of the (extended) family rather than on that of larger ethnic communities (115–128). On the other hand, ethnicity offers meaningful categories in social intercourse: beliefs and opinions about ethnicity—including stereotypes—offer a sense of anchorage in an increasingly diverse America (129–146). At the same time, in perceived ethnic traits like "we Irish stick together," the specific nationalities are often interchangeable; in fact, Waters suggests, they do not so much express ethnic idiosyncrasies but rather characteristically American family and middle class values (134).

Indeed, in the contemporary US, ethnic identity is no mere remnant of the Old World, but it rather responds to present-day American needs and requirements. After enumerating in the last chapter of the book "all the ways in which [ethnicity] does not matter"—from choosing marriage partners, to determining where one will live or what kind of job one will have, Waters concludes that nonetheless "people cling tenaciously to their ethnic identities" (147). Intriguingly, she suggests that this persistence of ethnicity through symbolic ethnicity can be explained in light of a characteristic tension in American life between individualism on the one hand and community or conformity on the other—something that has in fact been noted by critics ever since Tocqueville. As Waters explains, this tension between individualism and conformity consists of an inclination or desire among Americans to claim independence from society and turn inward toward an immediate circle of family and friends, and a simultaneous proclivity for voluntary association in various groups and communities (148). Symbolic ethnicity is attractive and persistent

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insensitivity to the not-so-privileged situation of non-white Americans and may even perpetuate racism (155–164).

because it is able to cater to both sides of this equation: it "offers a sense of rich culture through a community with no cost to the other contradictory values we also crave: individuality, flexibility, and openness to new ideas" (153). Precisely through the optional nature of symbolic ethnicity, one can feel part of a community and at the same time shape the affiliation according to one's individual(istic) preferences (150–151). Mediating between two opposite domains of American life and offering the best of them at only little cost, (symbolic) ethnicity "has a built-in sense of appeal for Americans that should make Coke and Pepsi envious. Madison Avenue could not have conspired to make a better and more appealing product" (154).

Waters' approach to ethnic identity has two important consequences for thinking about a Holocaust-centered Jewish identity. First, whereas the model of symbolic ethnicity would be inclined to rather cynically dismiss a Jewish identity centered on the Holocaust as superficial, Waters' approach calls for greater sensitivity to the very attraction of the memory of the Holocaust to individuals constructing a Jewish identity. As an approach more closely attuned to the reality of ethnic identity at the level of individuals, it suggests that even if the resulting Jewish identity *is* superficial in terms of content, it may still offer a meaningful and valuable sense of self and community to such individuals. In fact, such a form of identity appears as a contemporary manifestation of an established American individualist tradition, adapted to present-day needs. This is one important reason for caution before criticizing or dismissing the centrality of the Holocaust in Jewish identity. There is a second important implication to Waters' work, moreover, that is not directly considered or recognized by Waters herself. For the optional nature of identity emphasized by Waters also implies that ethnic identity may in fact be *more* than superficial and merely symbolic. Indeed, the increasing possibility of *choosing* one's (ethnic) identity means that individuals may follow their own individual interests, needs, and desires in giving shape to their identities, which may therefore be as superficial or as rich as they choose.

However, the very potential thus inherent in ethnic optionality has in fact been recognized by David Hollinger in his *Postethnic America*.[32] Hollinger's study is an attempt to reformulate the terms of the debate on ethno-racial diversity in America in order to move beyond multiculturalism and its increasingly dogmatic tendency to emphasize, and thereby

32 David A. Hollinger, *Postethnic America: Beyond Multiculturalism* (New York: BasicBooks, 1995). Hereafter cited in the text.

perpetuate, difference. Against the contentious tribalism fostered by multiculturalism, Hollinger's "postethnic perspective recognizes that most individuals live in many circles simultaneously and that the actual living of any individual life entails a shifting division of labor between the several 'we's' of which the individual is a part" (106). Hollinger resists the sense of uniformity and fixity implied by a term like identity, and suggests that a person's sense of self is in constant flux, shaped by self-chosen affiliations with various real or "imagined" communities and groups. He argues that "[i]ndividuals should be allowed to affiliate or disaffiliate with their own communities of descent to an extent that they choose, while affiliating with whatever nondescent communities are available and appealing to them" (116). Clearly, and as Hollinger admits himself, this is a highly idealistic vision that is not available to many Americans. However, as I will address in more detail in the next section, this vision *is* a reality for most American Jews, who can freely choose to be Jewish in whatever way they like. This enormous freedom of choice available to American Jews derives from the fact they live in the contemporary US, and indeed from the fact that they are Americans. What is significant, however, is that this "postethnic," contemporary American approach to Jewish identity does not make them any less Jewish. In fact, Hollinger emphatically disputes

> the common prejudice to the effect that affiliations based on choice are somehow artificial and lacking in depth, while those based on the ordinance of blood and history are more substantive and authentic. … There is certainly too much superficiality in the world, but superficiality does not follow from volition any more than authenticity follows from submission to tradition and authority. (119)

Postethnicity's more complex account of the nature and function of ethnic optionality suggests that even though the Holocaust may often be very important and indeed central to many people's Jewish identities, it is not necessarily the *only* component of a person's Jewish identity. Rather, as a thoroughly Americanized history, the Holocaust features comfortably alongside and in relation to other elements of one's identity—or rather, identit*ies*, both Jewish and other. As a more inclusive and dynamic perspective on identity, then, the notion of postethnicity enables a more sophisticated way of understanding how the Holocaust might function in a person's Jewish American identity. Moreover, such an understanding also accords much better with scholarship on contemporary Jewish American identity more generally.

Optional Jewish Identity, the Holocaust, and "Coalescence"

Time and again, scholars of contemporary Jewish American culture stress the optional dimension of Jewishness and of Jewish identity.[33] Yet the significance of this emphasis on the optionality of Jewish identity is not, simply, that contemporary American Jews can choose either to be or not to be Jews; in theory, Jews have *always* had that choice through the possibility of apostasy.[34] Instead, the point about the contemporary optionality of Jewishness is that Jews can choose to be Jewish in *whatever way they like*. As David Hollinger writes, "in America, one can be Jewish in several, different, equally valid ways, and … no one, regardless of his or her ancestry, can be told by this or that authority, that he or she is, or is not, a Jew."[35] To be sure, not everyone approves of this enormous freedom of choice. Nonetheless, as Hollinger points out, "it is this robust voluntarism … that defines the terms of the discussion" (53): the question of how to be a Jew in the contemporary US ultimately boils down to a matter of choice for the marginally affiliated as much as for the piously traditional. There is no reason, then, to assume that the choice to ascribe significance to the memory of the Holocaust in constructing one's sense of Jewishness is made only by the marginally affiliated. In fact, judging by the overwhelming presence of the Holocaust in Jewish American life, the more logical conclusion seems to be that American Jews of all hues and kinds are making that choice.

On another level, the choice to engage with the memory of the Holocaust as part of one's Jewish identity is representative of a wider shift in the nature of the Jewish American experience. If prewar Jewish American

33 Charles E. Silberman, for instance, writes that "being Jewish is simply one choice among many," and that Judaism is "an option rather than a burden or fate." Silberman, *A Certain People*, 160; 161. David Biale suggests that Jews are a "community of choice" and that "[i]n a free society all Jews are 'Jews by choice.'" David Biale, "The Melting Pot and Beyond: Jews and the Politics of American Identity," in *Insider/Outsider: American Jews and Multiculturalism*, eds. David Biale, Michael Galchinsky, and Susannah Heschel (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1998), 31. And Sara Bershtel and Allen Graubard point out that "Jews in America today are a people not 'chosen' but choosing." Bershtel and Graubard, *Saving Remnants*, 300.

34 Of course, apostasy or even conversion to Christianity did not always mean that Jews were no longer seen as Jews by the outside world. Nor did it always prevent former Jews from becoming the victims of anti-Semitism and persecution, as the histories of the Spanish Inquisition and indeed the Holocaust illustrate.

35 David A. Hollinger, "Jewish Identity, Assimilation, and Multiculturalism," in *Creating American Jews: Historical Conversations About Identity*, ed. Karen S. Mittelman (Philadelphia: National Museum of American Jewish History, 1998), 52. Hereafter cited in the text.

identities could be defined along characteristically ethno-religious terms, Jewish religion and ethnicity are no longer inseparable. For many Jews today, there is not necessarily a connection between being (or feeling) Jewish and Judaism; in fact, the ethnic dimension of Jewish identity has arguably become increasingly more central than the religious one. In this respect, Silberman interestingly suggests that "[f]or many American Jews, attending a seder or lighting Chanukah candles is an ethnic far more than a religious act; it is a way of asserting cultural or national identity rather than of obeying God's law."[36] In most cases, engaging with the memory of the Holocaust as part of one's Jewish identity also exemplifies precisely this shift towards an increasingly ethnic understanding of Jewishness (which is not to deny that the Holocaust certainly has made an impact on Judaism as well).[37] At the same time, however, to suggest that Jewish identity has become a *primarily* ethnic affair would be to simplify matters. In the first place this is because the religious dimension of Jewish identity remains important for the majority of American Jews.[38] But even more significantly, being Jewish increasingly appears less as a way of being ethnic, but, for all intents and purposes, as one way among others of being American. That is to say: the borders between one's Jewish identity and any other identity one has have become more and more fluid, to the extent that being Jewish increasingly coincides with, for instance, being a woman, a lesbian, a high school teacher, a film buff, a vegan, and a Democrat.[39]

36 Silberman, *A Certain People*, 235.

37 On the Holocaust and (American) Judaism, see for instance: Michael L. Morgan, *Beyond Auschwitz: Post-Holocaust Jewish Thought in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001); Zachary Braiterman, *(God) After Auschwitz: Tradition and Change in Post-Holocaust Jewish Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998).

38 Steven M. Cohen and Arnold M. Eisen found that "theology is far from irrelevant to [moderately affiliated] Jews. God is often quite important to them; spirituality is a felt concern; ritual and texts resonate with religious meaning that they view positively." "The Sovereign Self: Jewish Identity in Post-Modern America," *Jerusalem Letter/Viewpoints* No. 453 (8 Iyar 5761/1 May 2001), http://www.jcpa.org/jl/vp453.htm. The National Jewish Population Survey 2000–01 found that 46% of American Jews are member of a synagogue. United Jewish Communities, *The National Jewish Population Survey 2000–01*, 7. The American Jewish Committee's 2013 annual survey of American Jewish opinion noted that 65% of American Jews think of themselves as either Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, or Reconstructionist (the four major Jewish American religious dominations) against 33% of Jews who think of themselves as "Just Jews." "AJC 2013 Survey of American Jewish Opinion," American Jewish Committee, October 28, 2013, http://www.ajc.org/site/apps/nlnet/content3.aspx?c=70JILSPwFfJSG&b=8479755&ct=13376311.

39 In fact, as I will address in some detail below, remembering the Holocaust in America today takes place precisely at these various cross-roads of a person's identity.

This remarkable marriage, or fusion, of Jewish and American elements has been noted by a variety of critics. Karen Brodkin, for instance, writes that in the 1960s, "[b]eing Jewish was a way of being American," and Sara Bershtel and Allen Graubard suggest that today's "Jews are not *encountering* modern America, they *are* modern America."[40] In theoretically more elaborate ways, Steven M. Cohen and Arnold M. Eisen, have described the emergence of a highly individualist, constructed rather than primordial, and intensely fluid "postmodern Jewish self."[41] Yet it is Sylvia Barack Fishman who, in her study *Jewish Life and American Culture*, demonstrates in great detail and with much sophistication how such a fluid and fused Jewish American identity might actually *work* in people's lives and still be significantly Jewish. Fishman explains that "for most American Jews today distinctions between Jewish tradition and American context are seldom recognized. … External boundaries have become increasingly indistinct; internal aspects of Americaness and Jewishness—the contents of liberal American and Jewish cultures—appear to many Jews as almost identical."[42] Employing a complex interdisciplinary methodology, she demonstrates that the way in which American Jews negotiate and effectively fuse these distinct cultural legacies or repertoires is through the mechanism of "coalescence": a fundamentally pragmatic means of managing the diverse elements of one's identity.

Fishman introduces the concept of coalescence in distinct contrast with the older negotiating mechanism of adaptation and suggests that coales-

40 Brodkin, *How Jews Became White Folks*, 142; Bershtel and Graubard, *Saving Remnants*, 5. Italics in original.

41 Steven M. Cohen and Arnold M. Eisen, "The Sovereign Self." In this interview-based study, Cohen and Eisen specifically ascribe this "postmodern Jewish self" to moderately affiliated Jews, or the bulk of the population of American Jews. This postmodern Jewish identity retains many of the traditional elements of Jewishness, but on a structural level it is different from traditional forms of Jewish identity. Cohen and Eisen point out four general characteristics by which this postmodern Jewish self can be distinguished. First, Cohen and Eisen's subjects "emphasize *personal meaning as the arbiter of their Jewish involvement.* Their Judaism is personalist, focused on the self and its fulfillment rather than directed outward to the group. It is voluntarist in the extreme" (italics in original). Second, "*Jewish meaning is not only personal but constructed, one experience at a time*" (italics in original). A related third development is "the *emergence of Jews who combine great concern for issues of spirituality and meaning with severely diminished interest in the organizational life of the Jewish community*" (italics in original). And finally, "*identity is far more fluid than ever before.* One can change Jewish direction, and change again, at many points in life" (italics in original).

42 Sylvia Barack Fishman, *Jewish Life and American Culture*, SUNY Series in American Jewish Society in the 1990s (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000), 179. Hereafter cited in the text.

cence must be seen as "a pervasive process through which American Jews merge American and Jewish ideas, incorporating American liberal values such as free choice, universalism, individualism, and pluralism into their understanding of Jewish identity" (1). As Fishman explains, "[d]uring the process of coalescence, … the 'texts' of two cultures, American and Jewish, are accessed simultaneously. … These values systems [*sic*] coalesce or merge, and the resulting merged messages or texts are perceived not as being American and Jewish values side by side, but as being a unified text, which is identified as authoritative Judaism" (10).[43] The process of coalescence allows American Jews to construct hybridized identities according to their individual preferences, enabling them to merge together a multitude of elements that make up an identity—ethnic, religious, gender, civic, and nationalist elements, as well as sexual orientation. This does not mean, however, that coalescence is only practiced by the "postmodern" Jews studied by Cohen and Eisen. On the contrary, coalescence denotes an inclusive concept, describing strategies put into practice across the board of the Jewish American population, from the religious to the secular and from the marginally to the strongly affiliated. As Fishman puts it, "coalescence permeates virtually all strata of American Jewish life, from Orthodox to Reform, from well-educated leaders through the Jewish masses" (11).

The concept of coalescence and its fusion of Jewish and American identities offers another layer of complexity to understanding the ways in which the Holocaust may function within Jewish American identity. As the Holocaust represents an intensely Americanized cultural memory that is also and at the same time strongly associated with Jewish identity, engaging with this history takes place precisely at the intersection of a host of Jewish and American meanings and practices. That is to say, Holocaust-related activities and their significance with regard to identity are not isolated to an exclusively Jewish domain; rather, they serve to reinforce one's identity as a Jew *and* as an American. Indeed, today's many and intense Holocaust-related activities are only the most salient example of how Jewish Americans have been able to engage with elements of Jewish history and tradition and to employ characteristically American forms of free and limitless self-invention *at the same time*. As such, the history of the Holocaust on the

43 Elsewhere, Fishman in fact writes that "American Jews coalesce Jewish and American values and behaviors to produce *hybrid* American Judaisms." "Relatively Speaking: Constructing Identity in Jewish and Mixed-Married Families," in *American Jewish Identity Politics*, ed. Deborah D. Moore (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2009), 307. Emphasis added.

whole does not appear so much to challenge or subvert Jewish American identity on an existential level, but rather seems to strengthen it. What is crucial here is that the processes of Americanization, which assimilate the Holocaust so that it resonates with particularly American, essentially forward-looking, life-affirming, and optimistic meanings should not be conceived of as antithetical or as threateing to Jewish American identity. To the contrary, these processes are as integral to Jewish American life today as they are to the experience of other Americans. Indeed, Jewish Americans fundamentally engage with the history of the Holocaust on American terms—or they would not be able to confront it at all.

This is not to say, however, that American meanings ultimately trump Jewish ones after all. Indeed, the crucial insight offered by the concept of coalescence is that in all the more or less mainstream, Americanized Holocaust representations that inform Jewish American identity, the distinctions between (originally) Jewish and American meanings effectively dissolve and, indeed, coalesce. Arguably, the Americanization of the Holocaust represents not so much the de-Judaization of this history, but rather the Judaization of American culture[44]; and in as far as a film like *Schindler's List* informs Jewish American identity, it is as a text that is at once Jewish *and* American. Again, the point is not that the centrality of the Holocaust to Jewish American life suggests that American Jews have become fully assimilated or that the Holocaust has replaced all other aspects of Jewish identity. Instead, it powerfully reflects how Jews have become part of the American mainstream, yet without becoming any less Jewish because of it. And in fact, focusing on the centrality of the Holocaust in Jewish American life offers ways of understanding how contemporary Jewish American identities can often no longer be strictly characterized as religious, ethnic, or ethno-religious, but rather as hybrid in various degrees, or indeed *post*-ethnic.

Conclusion: What is the Problem with a Jewish Identity Centered on the Holocaust?

Scholars and Jewish leaders alike often meet the overwhelming contemporary Jewish American interest in the Holocaust with skepticism, dismissal, and sometimes even plain ridicule. However, if taken seriously

44 In fact, Sylvia Barack Fishman in *Jewish Life and American Culture* repeatedly suggests that whilst Judaism and Jewish culture are Americanized, American culture in turn is Judaized (1, 24, 47).

and viewed from a historically, sociologically, and theoretically informed angle, this centrality of the Holocaust rather offers a powerful illustration of the ways in which (Jewish) identities function and are constructed in the contemporary US. Indeed, it bears witness to the increasing fluidity of (ethnic) identity formation in present-day, postmodern America. At the same time, it demonstrates that the sense of free and unhindered self-invention that is a key component of the American ethos is now within reach of groups previously seen as "other." More specifically, the centrality of the Holocaust to American Jews represents at once drastic changes in the content and function of postwar Jewish American identity, as well as the remaining importance and significance of such an identity to most American Jews. It not only points to the optional nature of Jewish identity, but also to the extensive overlap with, and interconnection between, the Jewish and other dimensions of one's identity as a Jewish American. Significantly, both the optionality of Jewish identity as well as its "coalescence" with other aspects of life, as symbolized by the centrality of the Holocaust, characterizes the Jewish experience of the marginally as much as the strongly affiliated. Hence, the centrality of the Holocaust to Jewish American identity must not be taken to mean that the memory of these historical events has replaced all other forms of Jewish identity. By contrast, as the "only common denominator of American Jewish identity," as Peter Novick puts it, it is symbolic, rather, of the striking diversity of the contemporary Jewish American experience. Consequently, many of the commonly voiced reservations and arguments against the centrality of the Holocaust in Jewish American life are often curiously off the mark. By way of conclusion, it will be useful to briefly review some of the most often heard complaints.

Most critics seem to feel that the Holocaust offers too narrow a base on which to construct a Jewish identity. Consequently, they object to what they perceive as the superficial and trivial nature of a Holocaust-centered identity. There are at least three reasons, however, that suggest that these fears are misguided. First, I would emphasize that it is an extremely delicate matter to judge the content of contemporary ethnic identity in America. The experience of such an identity is a highly subjective affair, and, as my discussion of symbolic ethnicity demonstrated, the apparently insubstantial nature of symbolic ethnicity may be deceiving: whereas Herbert Gans tended to be dismissive of symbolic ethnicity, later scholars—notably Mary Waters—found that acculturated white ethnics often value their ethnic identities highly. As Werner Sollors wisely points out, "American ethnicity … is a matter not of content but of the importance

that individuals ascribe to it."[45] In other words, the charge of superficiality distracts from rather than illuminates the reasons why people continue to identify as ethnic in one way or another. Secondly, as I have emphasized at several points in this chapter, it must not be assumed that a Holocaust-centered Jewish identity is *only* and exclusively concerned with the Holocaust. Although there is likely to be a considerable number of American Jews whose sense of being Jewish is so thin that it is expressed only in occasionally tuning in to a Holocaust documentary on the History Channel, a Holocaust-centered identity does not mean that the memory of the Holocaust would replace and make redundant all other ways of being Jewish—to the contrary. Again, Holocaust-related activities only appear as the most salient and widely shared expressions of Jewishness among a variety of postethnic, coalesced Jewish American identities, which are, in turn, expressed by a much broader range of (Jewish) activities. Finally, it is not unlikely that even a superficial awareness of the Holocaust among the most marginally affiliated Jews may function as an incentive to develop a more sophisticated and profound Jewish identity. Though there is no statistical evidence available to confirm the thought, it may well be imagined that through an encounter with the history of the Holocaust—a viewing of *Schindler's List*, for instance—Jews are inspired to engage more profoundly with their Jewish background and to find further sustenance in it.

A less outspoken, more tacitly intimated concern regarding Jewish identity centered on the Holocaust is the idea that such an identity is not an *authentic* Jewish identity. Generally, it seems that a Holocaust-centered Jewish identity is perceived to be inauthentic because it is optional and therefore impervious to religion and Jewish law, and because it is influenced by the forces of consumerism and political opportunism (for instance because of the perceived political attractions of having a "victim identity"). All of these issues are outspokenly present, in fact, in *Why Should Jews Survive: Looking Past the Holocaust Toward a Jewish Future* by Rabbi Michael Goldberg. Concerned specifically with contesting the overwhelming presence of the Holocaust in American Jewish life and arguing for a return to and revitalization of the only authentic source of Jewish life (that is, religion, Judaism), Goldberg suggests:

> [v]ibrant, lively community eludes many American Jews because even as they look for it, they carry with them the infection that kills community in contemporary American life: *a culture of consumerism based on individual*

45 Werner Sollors, *Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent in American Culture* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 35.

> *preference*. Despite their vaunted theological differences, … [American Jews] all practice the same kind of Judaism—Consumer Judaism.[46]

However, as is often the case in discussions about authenticity, the (very charged) terms of the debate serve to hide a greater underlying issue. That is to say, what is in question is not so much the authenticity of contemporary Jewish American identity per se, but the nature and function of (ethnic) identity in the US more generally. Indeed, in America, ethnic optionality, consumerism, and politics serve not so much to distract from authentic identity formation; instead, they are vital ingredients to the process.

As regards ethnic optionality, it is remarkable that even though it is widely observed that (Jewish) ethnic identity is increasingly a matter of individual choice and preference, there is still a strong popular and scholarly bias against such degrees of freedom of ethnic choice. Marilyn Halter notes that "most critics assume that if there is any choice [of ethnic identities] involved at all, the identification is automatically less authentic."[47] However, as David Hollinger points out, the idea that a chosen ethnic identity would be inherently less authentic than a more "primordial" one is really a non sequitur: "superficiality does not follow from volition any more than authenticity follows from submission to tradition and authority."[48] Moreover, such a tendency to favor "primordial" identities over chosen ones is surprisingly blind to the fact that the liberty to *choose* the ways in which one wishes to be ethnic or not is precisely what explains the attractiveness of ethnicity in contemporary America. As Charles Silberman writes with regard to American Jews, ethnic optionality and the

46 Goldberg, *Why Should Jews Survive*, 136. Emphasis mine. In many ways Goldberg's book is a curious and remarkable work of scholarship. The book's thesis is presented in a systematic and meticulous scholarly manner in terms of argumentation and methodology. Moreover, Goldberg convincingly debunks a number of central and powerful dogmas that continue to dominate and sometimes to stifle the debate on how we should think and speak about the Holocaust and its position and meaning in Western culture. Despite all this, however, Goldberg's position is founded on a bedrock belief in God and the (redeeming) value of the Covenant: for him, only those people and those institutions who are concerned with the worship of God are truly Jewish. Consequently, Jewish life centered on the memory of the Holocaust is not truly Jewish, quite simply because it is not Judaism. Ultimately, then, the answer he provides to the question of Jewish survival can hardly sound appealing or even relevant to a large section of the Jewish American population whose Jewish identity takes shape in ways that are not exclusively religious, or not even religious at all.

47 Marilyn Halter, *Shopping for Ethnicity: The Marketing of Ethnicity* (New York: Schocken, 2000), 195. Interestingly, Halter immediately adds: "and if you then factor in any kind of commercial component, it becomes even more tainted."

48 Hollinger, *Postethnic America*, 119.

"emphasis on individual autonomy—on finding an approach to Judaism that has meaning for oneself—is the greatest *strength* of the current Jewish revival movement, not its fatal flaw."[49] Indeed, ethnic optionality is one central contemporary incarnation of the promise of America that allows individuals to become whoever they want to become.

Similarly, the fear that a Jewish identity centered on the Holocaust would be less authentic than other forms of Jewish identity because it would be more shaped by the forces of consumerism is to miss a fundamental point about ethnic identity formation in the contemporary US. Marilyn Halter demonstrates that in America today, "people most often construct their own identities and define others through the commodities they purchase. … Through the consumption of ethnic goods and services, immigrants and their descendants modify and signal ethnic identities in social settings no longer sharply organized around ethnic group boundaries and the migration experience."[50] Obviously, a Holocaust-centered Jewish identity also takes part in this dynamic: among the most readily available means of engaging with the Holocaust are buying and reading books about it, going to Holocaust movies or watching a documentary, and going to a Holocaust museum. These activities may in fact be seen as instances of coalescence: ways of giving shape to a *Jewish* identity made possible by *America's* most pervasive contribution to the world—consumer capitalism. Because it is nearly impossible to imagine a situation in contemporary America where market forces are *not* at work, judging the authenticity of any form of Jewish identity on the basis of commercial influences becomes an extremely arbitrary and subjective endeavor. Indeed, as Halter perceptively points out, "when market forces are at play, authenticity becomes itself a hot commodity" (18). And so, condemning the authenticity of a Holocaust-centered Jewish identity for being (excessively) shaped by commercial influences seems blind to the fact that "whether we like it or not, we are all deeply immersed in a commodity-driven, consumer culture that daily shapes who we are and how we define ourselves," as Halter puts it (198).

Finally, what goes for the consumerist dimension of the process of identity formation in the US also goes for the political dimension of it. To identify or not to identify with Jewishness through the Holocaust—or any other category that may make up Jewish identity or any other form of identity—is a social process that, as such, inevitably has political and ideo-

49 Silberman, *A Certain People*, 270.
50 Halter, *Shopping for Ethnicity*, 7. Hereafter cited in the text.

logical significance. There is as little reason to deny as there is to deplore this fact. As Alan Mintz points out, "engagement with the Holocaust is always mixed up with ulterior motives. This is not a truth that is unique to the Holocaust. Any kind of altruistic or idealistic commitment, whether to political movements, religion, or social welfare, is invariably a tangled knot of personal needs and larger ideals."[51] Indeed, to construct one's Jewish identity on the basis of the memory of the Holocaust is no more and no less a political choice than to maintain a more traditional, ethno-religious form of Jewish identity. As Louis Althusser might have pointed out, to identify as a subject at all is to immediately be interpellated by—or *subjected* into—a larger socio-political or ideological system.

This is not to deny, of course, that the memory of the Holocaust often has been the subject of what might be considered political and ideological misappropriations and abuses. In fact, it seems that what causes concern to many commentators is not so much the inevitably ideological nature of a Holocaust-centered Jewish identity as such, but the perceived political opportunism of it. Critics like Peter Novick and Norman Finkelstein for instance have argued that Jewish organizations and Jewish leaders have at times employed the memory of the Holocaust to further political and social causes that had very little to do with this European history per se. Novick argues that at the moment when American Jews had become the most successful minority by far, in the 60s and 70s, the Holocaust was embraced to foster a "victim identity" by which American Jews could lay claim to "all the moral privilege accompanying such certification."[52] More scandalously even, Finkelstein launched an open and much publicized attack against the "outright extortion racket" of a clique of Jewish ideologues operating what Finkelstein calls the "Holocaust Industry."[53] Yet it is to be questioned to what extent the memory of the Holocaust served such opportunistic purposes to individual American Jews generally. Indeed, it is helpful to make a distinction here between the public discourses of (Jewish) identity politics on the one hand and the formation of Jewish identity on a more private, individual level on the other. After all, what is significant about Jewish American identity today is precisely the fact that it is increasingly constructed on the basis of individual preference rather than defined by external authorities and injunctions, whether religious or secular. From such a perspective, then, it does not follow that any

51 Mintz, *Popular Culture*, 169.

52 Novick, *The Holocaust and Collective Memory*, 9.

53 Norman G. Finkelstein, *The Holocaust Industry: Reflections on the Exploitation of Jewish Suffering* (London and New York: Verso, 2000), 89.

politicized abuses of Holocaust memory in the public realm automatically delegitimize individuals' efforts to construct their Jewish identity on the basis of the Holocaust. Though some individuals and groups may have (ab)used the memory of the Holocaust for political and opportunistic purposes, they surely cannot be taken to be representative of a large number of Americans who, to a great or small extent, have given substance to their Jewish identities by engaging with the memory of the Holocaust.

In fact, this is also to raise a more fundamental issue. Even if the importance and centrality of the Holocaust to Jewish American culture as a collectivity virtually goes without saying, the exact *meaning* of this history to individuals and their identities is not so obvious or self-explanatory at all. That is to say, the significance of the Holocaust to Jewish American life does not suggest that all Jewish Americans relate to and identify with that history in the same way. In fact, the very diversity of contemporary American Jewry would rather seem to suggest the opposite. Though memory and identity are closely related to each other, there is no "straight line that runs from memory to identity," as Michael Rothberg emphasizes; "[o]ur relationship to the past does partially determine who we are in the present, but never straightforwardly and directly."[54] For that reason, the relationship between Holocaust memory and Jewish American identity is in fact a deeply complex and overdetermined one. It has been my intention in this chapter to lay bare the complexity at stake by situating the relationship between the Holocaust and Jewish American identity in various social and historical contexts and by considering it from a variety of theoretical angles. From such a perspective, it appears that the centrality of the Holocaust to Jewish American identity is not so much a sign of a plain and simple erosion and hollowing out of such an identity, but of much more complex changes in the very fabric of Jewish American selfhood and culture. What is really going on is that Jewish American identity is expressed in increasingly flexible and hybrid ways, where individuals merge elements of their Jewish identities with other dimensions of their lives, and in the process freely choose to regard or disregard Jewish traditions and conventions as they see fit.

For that reason, it is much too simplistic and reductive—not to mention cynical—to assume that individual American Jews' engagement with the Holocaust is generally motivated by superficial, opportunistic, or otherwise perverse or inappropriate considerations. On the contrary, it seems

54 Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 4–5.

much more realistic and productive to take American Jews' fascination with the Holocaust, as Mintz does,

> as the sign of a deep and authentic desire to reach beyond the conditions imposed upon them by the American milieu and their attenuated relationship to history. For some, of course, the fascination may be morbid or even prurient, and for others the form it takes may be disfigured by obsession or aggression. Yet for many, engagement with the Holocaust should be taken as a symptom of something more positive: an implicit awareness on the part of American Jews of how very insulated their lives have been from the turbulent currents of modern Jewish history.[55]

Ultimately, what is at stake here are not the quantitative but the *qualitative* ways in which the Holocaust figures in the contemporary Jewish American experience: complex and multifaceted processes of signification that cannot easily be grasped by statistical methods or other empirical tools. Doing justice to the intricate, overdetermined relationship between the memory of the Holocaust and processes of contemporary Jewish American identity formation consequently calls for detailed *cultural* analysis. As I will demonstrate in the next chapter, it is precisely in contemporary Jewish American literature that these processes can be studied in depth.

55 Mintz, *Popular Culture*, 169.

5

Inventing Jewish Worlds

Identity, History, and the Holocaust in Contemporary Jewish American Fiction

One of the most remarkable aspects of contemporary Jewish American literature is that it engages regularly and often intensely with the memory of the Holocaust. In fact, this strong and ever-recurring presence of the Holocaust is one of the most important aspects that marks this writing as Jewish. Indeed, in *Writing Our Way Home*, an influential 1992 anthology of Jewish writing, editor Ted Solotaroff observes that the Holocaust is a "frequent theme" in his collection, characterizing it as "the subject that doesn't go away, the black shadow athwart Jewish memory, the communion with the 'tremendum' … that perhaps most maintains the diverse Jewish population as the people of memory."[1] Similarly and more recently, Tresa Grauer singles out the Holocaust as the theme that "[m]ost notably … casts a long shadow over contemporary Jewish American literature." Significantly, she adds that "even when its presence in a text is minimal, it nevertheless marks many authors'—and characters'—attempts to come to terms with the meaning of Jewishness."[2] Of course, this lasting literary concern with the Holocaust stands in close relation to the ever greater centrality of the Holocaust in Jewish American life and the development toward a "Holocaust-centered Jewish American identity" that I explored in the previous chapter.[3] Though such a form of identity is often strongly criticized or not

1 Ted Solotaroff, "The Open Community," in *Writing Our Way Home: Contemporary Stories by American Jewish Writers*, eds. Ted Solotaroff and Nessa Rapoport (New York: Schocken, 1992), xxiii.

2 Tresa Grauer, "Identity Matters: Contemporary Jewish American Writing," in *The Cambridge Companion to Jewish American Literature*, eds. Michael P. Kramer and Hana Wirth-Nesher (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 272.

3 Obvious though this point may seem, it is in fact often overlooked or underemphasized, especially by those critics working with the trauma paradigm. See also the discussion of trauma theory in the introduction of this study.

taken quite seriously, I contend, however, that the engagement with the Holocaust in recent Jewish American fiction reflects powerfully upon the potentially sophisticated and heterogeneous ways in which the memory of the Holocaust informs the Jewish American experience. Indeed, authors like Nicole Krauss, Jonathan Safran Foer, Nathan Englander, and Michael Chabon tend to use the Holocaust as a way of entry into an immensely rich Jewish cultural and religious heritage. More precisely, this memory serves as a compass point in their literary attempts to make sense of both this heritage and contemporary Jewish life, as well as the relations between them. As such, this writing illustrates ways in which "Holocaust-centered identity" may mean not simply that all things Jewish revolve around the Holocaust, but how the Holocaust functions as an important, salient landmark in a rapidly and constantly changing "postethnic" Jewish context.

The writing of Krauss, Foer, Englander, and Chabon is firmly rooted in a well-established tradition of Jewish American literature, yet at the same time it is also significantly different from it. In order to appreciate the distinctiveness of this recent writing, therefore, it is necessary to briefly consider some salient aspects of this strong tradition of postwar Jewish American literature of which it is part. It will be helpful in particular to focus on how the memory of the Holocaust has manifested itself in this writing over the years, and on how this tradition has related to key developments in the postwar Jewish American experience. To this purpose, I propose to return to the immediate postwar decades when "Jews became white folks" and Jewish American literature went through a period of spectacular and unprecedented bloom.

It was during these years that Jewish American literary giants like Saul Bellow, Bernard Malamud, Philip Roth, and Isaac Bashevis Singer entered the scene of American letters and managed to stake out a place in the literary limelight. Moreover, these specific authors merely represented the vanguard of a host of successful Jewish American writers that followed in their wake. What characterized the writing of this Golden Age of Jewish American literature, critics widely agree, is the portrayal of the experience of marginality and alienation that characters faced in their attempts to reconcile immigrant backgrounds with the demands of assimilation.[4] If

4 Andrew Furman, *Contemporary Jewish American Writers and the Multicultural Dilemma: The Return of the Exiled* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2000), 16; Derek Rubin, "Postethnic Experience in Contemporary Jewish American Fiction," *Social Identities* 8, no. 4 (2002): 508, doi: 10.1080/1350463022000068352; Irving Howe, introduction to *Jewish-American Stories*, ed. Irving Howe (New York and Scarborough, Ontario: New American Library, 1977), 5–17; Allen Guttmann, *The Jewish*

the pre-World War II Jewish American writing of Abraham Cahan, Anzia Yezierska, and Henry Roth was primarily an immigrant literature, the work of Bellow, Malamud, and Philip Roth—all three the sons of immigrants—can be said to represent the "*post*-immigrant" experience, as Ted Solotaroff usefully suggests.[5] Judging by the enormous mainstream national and international successes the postwar generation of Jewish American writers achieved (including numerous National Book Awards and Pulitzer Prizes, as well as two Nobel Prizes for Literature), the post-immigrant chords they struck resonated widely.

One remarkable aspect about the writing of these successful post-immigrant Jewish American novelists, however, is that the presence of the Holocaust in it remains very covert. Robert Alter, for instance, wrote in a 1966 article that with the enormous Jewish interest in the Holocaust at that time, as well as the recent abundance of novels by Jewish American writers, "it gives one pause to note how rarely American-Jewish fiction has attempted to come to terms in any serious way with the European catastrophe."[6] Notwithstanding Alter's observation, however, it would be a mistake to assume that Jewish American writers were blind to the horrific events of recent Jewish history, or that the Holocaust had no place in their fiction at all. On the contrary: many critics have noted that the Holocaust often was an important *implicit* element of postwar Jewish American writing, including in that of Bellow, Malamud, Singer, and Cynthia Ozick. S. Lillian Kremer, for instance, calls the work of Malamud "Holocaust-haunted," and points out that throughout Bellow's work—in *Mr. Sammler's Planet* (1970), which features a protagonist who is a Holocaust survivor, as much as in his earlier novels—"the Holocaust is a subdued, ever present component. Although the Holocaust is rarely at the dramatic center, the works are rich in characters haunted by its spectre."[7] Emily Miller Budick observes that the Holocaust "persistently flits in and out of many [Jewish American] literary texts," but she also emphasizes the indirect nature of these engagements with the Holocaust.[8] As she points

Writer in America: Assimilation and the Crisis of Identity (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), 12.

5 Ted Solotaroff, "The Open Community," xiv. Emphasis added.

6 Robert Alter, "Confronting the Holocaust: Three Israeli Novels," *Commentary* 41, no. 3 (1966): 67.

7 S. Lillian Kremer, *Witnesses Through the Imagination: Jewish American Holocaust Literature* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1989), 37.

8 Emily Miller Budick, "The Holocaust in the Jewish American Literary Imagination," in Kramer and Wirth-Nesher, *The Cambridge Companion to Jewish American Literature*, 215, 216. Hereafter cited in the text.

out, there is very little Jewish American fiction that is directly about the Holocaust, but much of it is "Holocaust-inflected" (216). Such texts "inscribe the Holocaust sometimes silently, sometimes marginally—often in an allusion or phrase or set of images—in their pursuit of their other, more primary agendas, including, and even typically, Jewish identity in the United States" (216).

Over the years, however, the Holocaust became an ever more outspoken concern in Jewish American fiction. Yet at the same time, the attestations of intellectuals and literary critics like Theodor Adorno, George Steiner, Alfred Kazin, or a survivor like Elie Wiesel that the Holocaust could not and should not be represented in fiction did not go unheard.[9] Consequently, Jewish American authors' relationship to this history remained intensely vexed and complicated.[10] Until the arrival in the 1980s of the "Second Generation" of Holocaust writers, represented by children of survivors, direct, more or less realistic portrayals of events set in the Holocaust remained relatively rare. In this respect, works like Louis Epstein's novel *King of the Jews* (1979) or Ozick's short story "The Shawl" (1983) are indeed exceptions. As novelists and as Americans, far removed from the historical reality of the Holocaust, Jewish American writers generally preferred a more indirect, more controllable, perhaps a safer approach to

9 Dorothy Seidman Bilik, *Immigrant-Survivors: Post-Holocaust Consciousness in Recent Jewish American Fiction* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1981), 45.

10 If the survivors find it well-nigh impossible to write Holocaust fiction, Andrew Furman points out, "how much thornier the issue becomes when the Holocaust bestirs the imagination of *Jewish American* fiction writers. … Cognizant, perhaps, of this slippery moral terrain, Jewish American writers have proved especially reluctant in the wake of the Holocaust to dramatize the atrocity in their fiction." Furman, *Contemporary Jewish American Writers*, 59. Italics in original. Rather interesting in light of this is an interview with Jewish American writer Cynthia Ozick, conducted by Elaine M. Kauvar. Ozick tells Kauvar that she thinks that novelists should not write about the Holocaust and that she believes "with all my soul that [the Holocaust] ought to remain exclusively attached to document and history." When somewhat later Kauvar points out that Ozick herself wrote considerably direct fictional portrayals of the Holocaust in her short stories "The Shawl" and "Rosa," Ozick's response very clearly captures the extreme difficulty experienced by many Jewish American writers in dealing with the question of writing about the Holocaust: "Well, I did it in five pages in 'The Shawl,' and I don't admire that I did it. I did it because I couldn't help it. It wanted to be done. I didn't want to do it, and afterward I've in a way punished myself, I've accused myself for having done it. I wasn't there, and I pretended through imagination that I was." Cynthia Ozick, "An Interview with Cynthia Ozick," by Elaine M. Kauvar, *Contemporary Literature* 34, no. 3 (Autumn 1993): 390, 391, http://www.jstor.org/stable/1208680.

the Holocaust. In fact, one of the most common tropes American writers employed to engage with the Holocaust was the relatively inconspicuous figure of the "immigrant-survivor," of which Bellow's Mr. Sammler, Edward Lewis Wallant's Sol Nazerman, and Ozick's Rosa are some of the most well-known examples.[11]

Yet "there is a further reason for the American obliquity in relation to what is clearly European and not American Jewish history," Emily Miller Budick suggests.

> A major subject, both explicit and implicit, informing these Jewish American fictions is the new American reality of the Jew, in which European history is relevant background but not the primary story itself. Indeed, the story of the American Jew, in order to get itself going, may well have to rid itself of the past that binds it to Jewish realities no longer pertinent or desirable.[12]

In other words, Jewish American literature's reluctance to address the Holocaust directly does not only have to do with the intrinsic problems of representing this horrific history, aggravated by Jewish American authors' distanced position toward it; but it is precisely this distanced position as such—that is, the central concerns of Jewish American life—that also determines the ways in which the Holocaust functions within Jewish American literature. From such a perspective, then, the relative absence of the Holocaust in most Jewish American writing of the 50s and 60s and its steadily increasing presence in the writing of the "Second Generation" and the third generation (represented by Krauss, Foer, Englander, and Chabon, amongst others) assume broader sociohistorical significance. In fact, changing manifestations of the Holocaust in Jewish American fiction do not only suggest changing understandings of this history, but may also be seen as representing changes in the Jewish American experience.

With regard to changing representations of the past, it is immediately apparent that whereas the engagement with the Holocaust in the Jewish American writing of the immediate postwar generation was remarkably oblique, that of the Second Generation—the children of survivors—is often much more head-on. Both approaches, however, may be seen in Budick's terms as distinct stories of the American Jew that attempt to rid themselves of the past in order to get themselves going.[13] Strikingly, however, the most

11 Bilik, *Immigrant-Survivors*, 3–4.

12 Budick, "The Holocaust in the Jewish American Literary Imagination," 217.

13 Second Generation writing, for instance, generally represents the child's grappling with the inherited traumas of the parents and the effects these had on his or

recent Jewish American literature of the third generation shows no inclination to rid itself of any past, not least that of the Holocaust. Certainly, these authors still write about the Holocaust in implicit and oblique, rather than direct or realistic ways. However, they are writing in a period when this history has become a central component of the Jewish American experience that positively reinforces Jewish American identity. And so, what distinguishes their approach from the Jewish American writing of the 50s and 60s is that it does not seem to be marked by an inherent *reluctance* to confront the Holocaust. In fact, the writing of Chabon, Krauss, Englander, and Foer bespeaks a distinct eagerness to engage with this history as well as a certain impious determination not to be swayed by a host of reasons that might discourage these authors to write about it. This these authors have in common with the Second Generation authors, who insist upon engaging with the Holocaust through fictional means. For the Second Generation, however, literature sometimes seems almost a single-topic business, well-nigh exclusively devoted to representing the Holocaust as an intergenerational trauma. By contrast, the third generation's engagement with this history assumes much more varied manifestations. That is to say, the Holocaust in this writing is not solely associated with psychological and intergenerational trauma, but may function in folksy tales about Eastern European shtetls (as in Englander's "The Tumblers"), contemporary stories about the legacies of history as well as the difficulties of uncovering it (as in Foer's *Everything Is Illuminated* and Krauss's *The History of Love*), and even classic stories about the American Dream (Chabon's *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*). Indeed, for this generation of writers, the Holocaust, even if recognized as a historical trauma, has become a familiar, Americanized history. As such, it has become a staple of the Jewish American literary repertoire.

Though for some critics these changing approaches to the Holocaust suggest a general hollowing out and erosion of the memory of the Holocaust, they may indeed be understood much more fruitfully as reflecting significant changes in the broader context of the contemporary Jewish

her own upbringing and identity. In the work of authors like Melvin Jules Bukiet, Thane Rosenbaum, and most notably, Art Spiegelman, the Holocaust is a highly visible, unavoidable, as well as agonizing presence. Indeed, it seems that literature for these authors is not only a means of artistic expression, but also a means of exorcising their parents' ghosts. Thane Rosenbaum's *The Golems of Gotham* (New York: HarperCollins, 2002) takes this metaphor especially seriously. An actual ghost story, it features a New York City apartment on Edgar Allen Poe Street inhabited by the ghosts of famous Holocaust writers, including Primo Levi and Paul Celan, whose shared characteristic, in addition to each being a survivor of the Holocaust, is that they all committed suicide.

American experience. Earlier, I noted that the successful Jewish American literature of the 50s and 60s was marked less by the Holocaust than by the experience of marginality and alienation as a result of the conflicted processes of assimilation. However, "[a]s Jewish Americans gained material success and cultural confidence in the years following World War II," Andrew Furman notes, "marginality and alienation ceased to define the Jewish American experience and, predictably, could not fuel a second wave of such fiction."[14] And so, paradoxically, at the moment when Jewish American literature was at the height of its fame in the 1960s and 1970s, a host of critics, among them Robert Alter, Ruth Wisse, Leslie Fiedler, and, most famously, Irving Howe, hurried to sound Jewish American fiction's death knell.[15] Equating Jewish American literature with the representation of the (post-)immigrant experience, these critics felt that with the receding of this experience and the ongoing processes of assimilation in Jewish American life, the Jewish American novel had no future. Yet what such critics "hadn't counted on," Sanford Pinsker points out, "was the staking out of fictional claims on essentially new territories, ones that an older generation of Jewish writers largely ignored or only addressed from oblique angles."[16] And indeed, although Jewish American literature never really did die out, by the 1990s, critics were beginning to make note of a "new wave" of talented Jewish American authors and to actually speak of a "Jewish literary revival."[17]

This new wave of Jewish writing comprises the work of authors like, among many others, Rebecca Goldstein, Thane Rosenbaum, Allegra Goodman, Art Spiegelman, Pearl Abraham, Michael Chabon, and, most recently, Nathan Englander, Jonathan Safran Foer, and Nicole Krauss. In the work of these authors—all of them born after World War II, and the latter three as late as the 1970s—the post-immigrant experience has receded into the background. There, it still regularly appears as an important element

14 Furman, *Contemporary Jewish American Writers*, 16.

15 Bilik, *Immigrant-Survivors*, 3–4; Furman, *Contemporary Jewish American Writers*, 16; Derek Parker Royal, "Unfinalized Moments in Jewish American Narrative," *Shofar* 22, no. 3 (2004): 1–2, doi: 10.1353/sho.2004.0075; Irving Howe, introduction to *Jewish-American Stories*, 16–17.

16 Sanford Pinsker, "Dares, Double-Dares, and the Jewish-American Writer," *Prairie Schooner* 71, no. 1 (1997): 282, http://www.jstor.org/stable/40637081. The new territories Pinsker has in mind are "Israel and the Holocaust, subjects fraught with peril and a rich potential for controversy, but that also engage the contemporary Jewish imagination in ways that yet another rendering of suburban meretriciousness does not" (282).

17 Royal, "Unfinalized Moments," 3.

of Jewish American history, but no longer as the one inevitable characteristic of either the Jewish American experience or its literature. In fact, like the Jewish American experience itself, Jewish American writing can no longer be defined by a single conventional characteristic or subject matter. Instead, it has developed into a genre concerned with a vast and multifaceted array of themes, exploring the breadth and profundity of the Jewish religion and culture, as well as the Jewish past and present, while confidently "coalescing" all of these with contemporary American issues such as feminism, identity, and sexuality. In short, as Ted Solotaroff puts it, post-immigrant Jewish American fiction has made way for a "post-acculturated" Jewish American fiction.[18] And even though this body of post-acculturated Jewish fiction may be characterized less by a shared, coherent subject matter than its post-immigrant predecessor, this is not to say that this more recent fiction has become any less Jewish. On the contrary, it asserts itself as Jewish with ever-increasing confidence. As Solotaroff's co-editor, the writer Nessa Rapoport, puts it, "[h]aving won our place in American culture, we are beginning to be confident enough to reclaim Jewish culture."[19]

What exactly it is that makes this post-acculturated writing "Jewish" is difficult to say. Yet this should neither surprise us, nor deter us to speak of this writing as "Jewish": after all, the question of what is "Jewish literature" as such has *always* been notoriously difficult to answer in any straightforward thematic, formal, or structural way.[20] Yet a post-acculturated Jewish American literature that actively defies any attempt to identify in it a stable core of "Jewishness" takes the traditional difficulties of categorization to new heights of obstinacy—unless, of course, this very instability itself is taken as a central characteristic of post-acculturated Jewish American literature. Indeed, many critics take the increasingly diversifying and constantly changing nature of contemporary Jewish American literature as representing a profound concern with, precisely, the question of identity. For instance, Tresa Grauer, in a survey article of contemporary Jewish American writing, suggests that "[t]ogether, the rich array of literary texts that has emerged over the past twenty-five years should be examined less for its coherence as a body of literature defined *by* an identity

18 Ted Solotaroff, "The Open Community," xv.

19 Nessa Rapoport, "Summoned to the Feast," in Solotaroff and Rapoport, *Writing Our Way Home*, xxx.

20 Hana Wirth-Nesher, "Defining the Indefinable: What Is Jewish Literature," in *What Is Jewish Literature*, ed. Hana Wirth-Nesher (Philadelphia and Jerusalem: The Jewish Publication Society, 5754 / 1994), 3–12. The very title of Wirth-Nesher's essay says it all.

as for its focus *on* it."[21] At the same time, this also creates new problems of methodology, Grauer realizes. "The fact that heterogeneity is the basis for this discussion of Jewish identity makes conventional categorizing of the literature somewhat paradoxical; any attempt to group contemporary texts according to discrete thematic 'topics' will artificially separate identity categories that the authors themselves intentionally combine" (272). Ultimately, however, Grauer admits that if one cannot highlight various literary themes at the inevitable cost of others, critical discussions of this literature become impossible. In such critical discussions, then, it is "important to remember that the taxonomies are a function of the criticism, and not of the literature itself" (273). In this chapter's discussion of the work of Krauss, Foer, Englander, and Chabon, my concern is with how this writing explores and represents the significance of the Holocaust in relation to the contemporary Jewish American experience. To that purpose, I wish to consider these authors' engagement with the Holocaust in relation to two separate literary themes that are clearly present in their writing: Jewish identity and Jewish history and culture. Bearing in mind Grauer's concerns, I obviously do not mean to suggest that these themes more than any other represent the essence of this writing. Instead, I want to contend that it is precisely in the ways these authors intertwine the issues of Jewish identity and Jewish history and culture with the Holocaust that they bear witness to the heterogeneity, and the (self-)constructed, coalesced, and postethnic nature of contemporary Jewish American identity. Moreover, by thus imaginatively constructing Jewish worlds in relation to the Holocaust, they at once demonstrate and embrace the rich and complex possibilities of such a postethnic identity, rather than exemplify the irreversible decline and ultimate disappearance of Jewish American identity in the US.

From a methodological point of view, it is important to make a distinction here on the one hand between the ways in which a literary text presents the issue of identity as a distinct theme (often through its representation of one or more characters), and, on the other hand, the ways in which a text can be read to reflect matters of identity in a more generic way. The reason for this is, as Grauer succinctly puts it in her discussion of a novel by Nomi Eve, that "identity is inscribed both in and by narrative."[22] Thus, a novel like Edward Lewis Wallant's *The Pawnbroker* might be read as an exploration of the identity of a Holocaust survivor, but also

21 Grauer, "Identity Matters," 270. Italics in original. Hereafter cited in the text. See also Furman, *Contemporary Jewish American Writers*.

22 Ibid., 281.

as a more general reflection of the deeply problematic place the memory of the Holocaust has in 1960s Jewish American identity: by that time Jews had achieved a heretofore unknown degree of social and economic success while paradoxically the memory of the Holocaust seemed to endow Jews with an identity of perpetual victims. Moreover, this ever growing attention to the memory of the Holocaust seemed to obscure the historical and contemporary victimhood experienced by African Americans, whose continuing harsh reality remained worlds away from the privileges that American Jews had managed to achieve.

My discussion of the ways in which the work of Chabon, Foer, Krauss, and Englander approach Jewish identity (as a character concern) and Jewish history in relation to the Holocaust is intended to read this literature from an identity perspective in both these methodologically distinct ways. A further motivation for this distinction, moreover, is the following: though the representation of identity as a character concern might be expected to constitute the primary means by which these authors reflect on the Holocaust in relation to Jewish American identity, this is, perhaps surprisingly, not necessarily the case. In Krauss's *The History of Love* and Foer's *Everything Is Illuminated*, the main characters each *do* construct a sense of Jewish identity that is centered in significant ways around the Holocaust—using means, moreover, that are notably postethnic. However, in Englander's *The Ministry of Special Cases*, for example, both the Holocaust and the formation of his main characters' Jewish identities are central themes, but they are not immediately connected. Set in Argentina at the time of the "Dirty War," Englander's protagonists experience their Jewish identity in ways that do not leave much space either for making "ethnic options" or for contemplating the memory of the Holocaust as a source of ethnic affirmation—on the contrary. Still, the Holocaust is a constantly implied metafictional concern of the novel that functions to lend meaning to the historical events of the Dirty War. Yet it is also precisely in that way that the novel is grounded in the contemporary Jewish American imagination. In order to appreciate this, therefore, it is necessary to assume a critical angle that looks beyond its portrayal of character to the ways in which it represents (Jewish) history.

Growing up without a father and with a highly distracted mother, the question of identity is keenly felt by Alma, the young protagonist of Nicole Krauss's novel *The History of Love*, as well as by her younger brother Bird. Experiencing little parental guidance, both children consciously try to establish for themselves a meaningful sense of who they are in relation

to their immediate surroundings and experiences. In this process, they effortlessly combine and coalesce a Jewish cultural repertoire with the everyday realities of ordinary American children growing up in the twenty-first century. Already Bird's name offers a paradigmatic—as well as distinctly "Holocaust-inflected"—illustration: "Bird" is only the most recent in a long series of names he has adopted for himself, whereas his given name is Emanuel Chaim, "after the Jewish historian Emanuel Ringelblum, who buried milk cans filled with testimony in the Warsaw Ghetto, and the Jewish cellist Emanuel Feuermann, … and also the Jewish writer of genius Isaac Emmanuilovich Babel, and [his mother's] uncle Chaim, … who died by the Nazis."[23] The seamless overlap between Jewish heritage and contemporary American realities can also be seen in the way Bird indulges himself with cultivating a personal identity that is notably Jewish but also as innocent and endearing as any American kid's addiction to comic books or infatuation with movie stars. At the tender age of nine and a half, Bird becomes an extremely devout disciple of his own version of Judaism. Among the more colorful manifestations of his faith is his belief that he may be a *lamed vovnik*—one of the thirty-six righteous men on whom the existence of the world depends, according to the Talmud—or even the Messiah himself. In the first place, Bird's religious antics offer a comic note to the narrative—an adult's amusement about a child's dead serious silliness. At the same time, however, the comedy also serves as a mildly satirical commentary on the nature of contemporary Jewish American religious life and the way in which religion has become an entirely optional dimension of Jewish identity to the extent that it can even turn into a child's game.

The postethnic range of possibilities and freedom of choice with regard to contemporary Jewish American identity are even more strikingly and overtly dramatized in a passage in which Alma's mother tries to educate her daughter on the richness and complexity of her "roots." She tells Alma that she is "one-quarter Russian, one-quarter Hungarian, one-quarter Polish, and one-quarter German" (152), but immediately realizes that this is not where things end by far. "'Actually,' she said, 'you could say that you're three-quarters Polish and one-quarter Hungarian, since Bubbe's parents were from Poland before they moved to Nuremberg, and Grandma Sasha's town was originally in Belarus, or White Russia, before it became part of Poland" (152). This continues for some time, until Alma's mother

23 Nicole Krauss, *The History of Love* (London: Penguin, 2006), 52. Hereafter cited in the text.

has drawn sixteen different ethnic pie charts which are all correct. When she then discovers that there is yet another possibility, Alma cuts her off and shouts at her, "I'M AMERICAN!" (153). Her mother replies with an apt "[s]uit yourself," while Bird, from the corner of the room, mutters "[n]o you're not. You're Jewish" (154). It seems to me that all three of them are correct and that Alma is really all of these many things. At the same time, the exchange wonderfully highlights that the ethnic optionality and flexibility that now characterizes contemporary Jewish American formation may still be a profoundly complicated affair.

The various and complex ethnic and historical strands available to Alma offer her enormous creative possibilities for expressing a highly personalized, self-constructed sense of identity, in which the history of the Holocaust, moreover, functions as an important motivator. As in Bird's case, Alma's name is significant. At first glance, it seems as unremarkable as any other American name, but in the course of the novel, Alma discovers that at the origin of the highly contingent sequence of events that have ultimately bestowed her with this name lies a Jewish history about the Holocaust. And it is in the process of mapping out these events that Alma is able to construct a narrative from which she can derive a sense of identity that is, in a way, grounded in the Holocaust. Alma is named "after every girl in a book my father gave [my mother] called *The History of Love*" (52), which is written in Spanish by a certain Zvi Litvinoff. For a number of complicated reasons, this obscure novel sets Alma on a quest for knowledge, which engages her initially with thoughts about her father, and then about the novel itself—in particular the character she is named after. "I started to think about her. Alma. Who was she? … [T]he more I thought about it, the more I thought that she also must have been *someone*" (172, italics in original). In the course of her research, she wildly—but as it turns out, correctly—surmises that the character of Alma must have been real, and she sets up a full-blown missing person search that confronts her with and forces her to think about the history of the Holocaust. Not only is she convinced that the Alma Mereminski from the novel is real, she also thinks that she survived the Holocaust and may even now be living close by in New York. As she explains to her friend Micha:

> [Litvinoff] was from Poland, right, and my mom said he escaped before the Germans invaded. The Nazis killed pretty much everyone in his village. So if he hadn't escaped, there'd be no *History of Love*. … So if [Alma] is real, which I think she is, Litvinoff must have known her as a child. Which means they were probably from the same village. And Yad Vashem doesn't list any Alma Mereminski from Poland who died in the Holocaust. (223–224)

When Micha questions her conclusions as well as her intentions, Alma is suddenly lost for words. She "didn't know how to say that even though I'd started out looking for someone who could make my mother happy again, now I was looking for something else, too. About the woman I was named after. And about me" (224). Alma's mission of making her mother happy again, her quest for Alma Mereminski and research into the history of the Holocaust, as well as her fully customized search for her own private identity have all turned into one and the same thing. Thus, Alma's engagement with Holocaust-inflected history dramatizes how her sense of identity is a matter of twenty-first century do-it-yourself ethnic bricolage; crucially, however, this is also precisely what to Alma lends moral and historical substance to her sense of identity.

In Jonathan Safran Foer's *Everything Is Illuminated*, the Holocaust has an even more central part in the protagonist Jonathan's search for identity. In contrast to Krauss's fourteen year old Alma, whose search for identity and the function of the Holocaust in it is somewhat haphazard and unmethodical, Foer's protagonist is an intelligent, well-educated young Jewish American adult who is very determined to discover on his trip to Ukraine what happened to his grandfather and his shtetl during the Holocaust. Jonathan explains this by saying to Alex that "I want to see Trachimbrod. … To see what it's like, how my grandfather grew up, where I would be now if it weren't for the war. … And I want to see what it's like now."[24] Yet the Holocaust, the war, and the passage of time have left nothing of Trachimbrod to find: no family history, no remnants, no roots. Instead, what Jonathan encounters is an eerie absence of anything, a void. At the same time, the discovery of this void does not ultimately make Jonathan's quest for identity come to a halt. On the contrary, it fuels it: as they are aimlessly driving through the Ukrainian countryside, Alex sees that Jonathan "kept filling his diary. The less we saw, the more he wrote" (115). Indeed, as the novel as a whole bears witness to, it is precisely the utter physical destruction by the Nazis of the shtetl of Jonathan's ancestors that gives him free rein to imagine and re-invent this history according to his own pleasure. I will discuss the contents of this imagined history of Trachimbrod in more detail further in this chapter. Yet the very fictionality of this history, which the novel constantly emphasizes, powerfully suggests that identity for Jonathan is a very self-consciously undertaken process of construction, invention, and imagination.

24 Jonathan Safran Foer, *Everything Is Illuminated* (London: Penguin, 2003), 59. Hereafter cited in the text.

In other words, Jonathan's identity is paradigmatically postethnic and Holocaust-centered.

By contrast, however, Nathan Englander's *The Ministry of Special Cases*, set in 1970s Argentina during the military junta's Dirty War, offers a critical counterpoint to Krauss and Foer's radical ethnic constructivism. Englander's Jewish characters try extremely hard to personally customize their Jewish identities, yet are generally trumped by older, less flexible notions of identity. If the memory of the Holocaust plays a part in their sense of identity at all, it would be to remind them of the historical inescapability—and dangers—of being Jewish, rather than to offer them the opportunity to blithely engage with their ethnic identity as they see fit. Englander's novel tells the story of Kaddish Poznan, whose name refers to the Jewish prayer for the dead. Kaddish came into the world more dead than alive, and so this name was given to him by the Rabbi in order "to ward off the angel of death. A trick and a blessing. Let this child be the mourner instead of the mourned." [25] In an ambiguous way, Kaddish indeed lives up to the promise of his name, defiantly honoring the memory of his dead mother when many Jews of Buenos Aires try to forget their parents. Kaddish, whose father is unknown, is the son of a Jewish prostitute who belonged to the Society of the Benevolent Self, a Jewish congregation infamous for its involvement in prostitution and crime during the 1920s. The Jews of Buenos Aires despise the memory of the Benevolent Self and its descendants deny their connection. Kaddish is the only one who does not try to evade this compromising past. For him, his prostitute mother remains the only link to his personal history and so he continues to visit her grave. In fact, Kaddish is the only one to ever enter the Benevolent Self's walled-in section of the already walled Jewish cemetery. Yet this makes him a social outcast among the Jews. Even if they sometimes see him climb into the Benevolent Self section of the graveyard, "[n]o one acknowledged he was there. If they could forget every last person buried in that ruffians' graveyard, it wasn't difficult to add one more. From then on, it was as if he wasn't. The Jews forgot Kaddish Poznan too" (9). Thus, by willingly forming a community of forgetting, rather than the proverbial Jewish community of remembering, the descendants of the members of the Benevolent Self try to take control over their own identities. Yet these identities are not postethnic forms of self-fashioning made possible by acceptance and tolerance; produced, rather, by acts of willful forgetfulness,

25 Nathan Englander, *The Ministry of Special Cases* (New York: Vintage, 2008), 10. Hereafter cited in the text.

they only serve to mask temporarily the slumbering existence of more essentialist forms of identity.

In fact, these lingering, more primordial understandings of identity rise to the surface again when the situation in Argentina severely deteriorates in the period between the death of president Juan Perón in 1974 and the *coup d'état* by General Videla in 1976. Forgotten memories, including those of Kaddish, return to the descendants of the Benevolent Self. They finally "acknowledged what Kaddish had always known—the wall separating those two cemeteries wasn't so high. So desperate were they then not to be linked to the Benevolent Self that they turned to the only one who wouldn't let it go. They hired Kaddish Poznan to cross over the wall. They paid him good money to erase the names" (11). Ironically, Kaddish, the mourner, becomes the performer of the classic Jewish curse of blotting out someone's name. Yet even as the Benevolent Self descendants deny their ancestry, believing themselves able to fashion their own identity, they confirm the precedence of Kaddish's more clannish views on identity. As Kaddish explains to his nineteen year old son Pato, "[t]here is no running away. … If you do, when you're old it's much worse. You'll forget your name. You'll forget what you're saying as the words come out of your mouth. Then, without anything left, you'll remember who you are and you'll find yourself afraid and alone among strangers" (61).

Indeed, for Kaddish and his wife Lillian, Jewish identity is primarily a matter of blood and race. A sense of Jewishness allowing more agency, to be expressed in religious or cultural ways, has only a symbolic significance to them: having had a Jewish upbringing, they remain very conscious of the Jewish calendar, but they no longer live by it or perform its rituals except on rare occasions. Yet lack of devotion does not diminish their sense of "Jewishness"; they experience their Jewishness acutely as an inescapable burden that always marks Jews as Other, making them perpetually vulnerable. Yet this sense of vulnerability is precisely what gives them their sense of identity and, paradoxically, harnesses them against that vulnerability. Thus, when Pato criticizes his parents for their paranoia, Lilian responds: "[w]e're both paranoid in different ways. … My way and you may live to be anxious until a ripe old age. … It doesn't matter if anyone's really coming or not, it's your lot as a Jew to fear it. We are bred for waiting" (97). Despite this sense of historically ingrained Jewishness, Kaddish and Lillian at one point nonetheless fall prey to the temptation of escaping from such a primordial sense of identity. And not least because of their own dependence on a sense of identity based on heredity, their attempted escape from the bonds of blood fails in a mis-

erable, tragicomic way. When Dr. Mazursky, a client of Kaddish's and a well-known plastic surgeon, proves unable to pay Kaddish after he has chiseled away the doctor's father's name from his gravestone, Mazursky proposes an alternative payment. Convincing Kaddish that he has a "horrendous ax of a nose" (81), which no doubt causes all kinds of medical concerns, he offers him a nose job "to correct the medical malady and make you handsome to boot" (82). But the correction is not simply of a medical or cosmetic nature, but also a racial one. "We can cure you," the doctor assures Kaddish, "[w]e can liberate the man trapped inside the Jew" (84). Kaddish ultimately accepts Mazursky's offer, but only on the condition that his wife and son (who indignantly refuses) receive one as well. Mazursky agrees, but it turns out there is a catch. While Kaddish is successfully treated by Dr. Mazursky himself, Lillian's nose job is performed by one of Mazursky's students, and the result looks horrible. Soon after, moreover, the lives of the Poznans take an even more serious change for the worst, when their son Pato is arrested. When Kaddish and Lillian go to a police station to tell their story and get their son back, the officer exclaims that "[n]one of it makes any sense, least of all the photo. The kid can't come from either of you" (163). Horrified, Kaddish and Lillian realize that their noses do not in the least resemble Pato's anymore. Their tampering with their identity has backfired.

Whereas the descendants of the Benevolent Self performed a traditional curse by having Kaddish blot out the names of their ancestors, it appears that Kaddish and Lillian's decision to have their large "Jewish" noses corrected represents a similar form of chutzpah. Though Englander is fairly sympathetic to Jews giving shape to their identity in non-traditional ways, he is not as kind to attempts to *deny* Jewish ancestry, apparently suggesting that this cannot—or ought not—really be done.[26] Lillian, for instance, is heavily punished for her vanity. After the kidnapping of Pato, she "cried so hard, rocked so hard, blew so hard that in the thumb pressing and tissue squeezing, Lillian felt her nose give way. … Her two-bit bad-debt first-time nose job seemed to have come undone" (172). Even though Kaddish is able to convince Dr. Mazursky to personally and immediately operate on

26 Another wonderful example is when Kaddish goes to the Benevolent Self synagogue, on a job to remove a name embroidered in gold thread on the *parochet*, the curtain covering the Torah Ark. Kaddish completes his task, but the unexpected result is a perfect palimpsest. "Protected from the light, from the air, cocooned in the gold, the velvet underneath was unfaded. The pattern of the needlework outlined each letter. Kaddish had achieved the exact opposite of what had been intended. Esther's name had never before shone so brightly" (137).

Lillian, fix her nose and make it as good-looking as Kaddish's, Lillian's old nose is gone forever, which she experiences as the worst punishment. As she explains to her husband, "[t]he first time I ever enjoyed my own reflection was after Pato was born. For a parent, from then on, when I looked in the mirror I saw myself and I saw him. We were the same, Kaddish. A son and a twin. Now he's gone from the mirror too. It is like murder, this nose" (173). For Lillian, her relationship with her son and her identity as a mother is at least in part determined by their similar appearance. And so, she feels that after the disappearance of Pato, her nose job makes her an accomplice to murder.

Though Jewishness is as strong a concern to Englander as it is to Krauss and Foer, his characters' sense of Jewish identity is decidedly different from that of Krauss's Alma or Foer's Jonathan. For Alma and Jonathan—young, turn of the century Jewish Americans—Jewishness is a dimension of their lives that they can choose to give shape to according to their own preferences. Yet for Kaddish and Lillian, who live in very different circumstances, it inheres in older, less flexible beliefs, customs, and blood relations that ultimately define them, even if they live up to their precepts halfheartedly. Somewhat boldly stated, Englander's Buenos Aires Jews have only two ethnic choices: either to assimilate and effectively deny their Jewish identity, or to assert it. Both options are equally fraught with danger—of (anti-Semitic) persecutions and of other, more subtle and "poetic" forms of punishment. Of course, Englander's exploration of Jewish identity cannot be seen in separation from the bleak historical setting of his narrative, where processes of identity take place in distinctly different ways than in contemporary America. At the same time, the historical setting of his novel is profoundly informed by concerns relevant to the contemporary Jewish American context that gave birth to it—notably the issue of ethnic optionality, as discussed, and the memory of the Holocaust, as I will demonstrate shortly. Even if neither are part of the reality of Kaddish and Lillian, they are part of the twenty-first Jewish American reality that imagined them and their world. Consequently, that reality has on the one hand instilled the representation of 1970s Argentina with a remarkable awareness if not of the constructedness then certainly of the contingency of Jewish identity. On the other hand, moreover, it has represented this historical setting itself from an emphatically Holocaust-centered perspective.

Consequently, it is at this point that I wish to cast a wider net and change my focus from the ways in which these Jewish American novels represent identity as an important concern to their characters to the ways in which matters of contemporary Jewish American identity are reflected

in the portrayals of Jewish histories. This is to move away from the specific level on which the novels portray identity as a literary theme related to character toward a more general analysis that takes these novels themselves as articulations of identity. Indeed, as *narratives*, these novels are significant participants in a contemporary discourse about Jewish American identity. And so, this is to attend to the notion that the issue of identity is inscribed not only *in* the narrative, but *by* the narrative as well. The theoretical groundings of this perspective are to be located, on the one hand, in a development in critical theory which has sought to conceptualize identity as discursive process, a construct created by language in narrative; and on the other hand in the Bakhtinian idea of the novel as the artistic medium most closely attuned to contemporary reality, uniquely capable of representing and reflecting upon on the contemporary human condition.

With regard to recent theorizations of identity, it has become an accepted view in cultural studies as much as in the social sciences that identity is *not* what remains of a person or a group when all appearance and culture is stripped away. On the contrary, and in spite of the connotations of stability and essences that the very term implies, identity is not a thing or a condition, but an ongoing process that inheres and is constructed in language, traditions, beliefs—in short, in the stories we tell about ourselves. "Identities are … constituted within, not outside representation," Stuart Hall notes. They are about "questions of using the resources of history, language and culture in the process of becoming rather than being: not 'who we are' or 'where we are came from,' so much as what we might become, how we have been represented and how that bears on how we might represent ourselves." Significantly, this process of identity formation through the "narrativization of the self," is by nature "necessarily fictional," making narrative fiction, novels in particular, an important location for studying identity.[27] As Maureen Whitebrook notes,

> [n]ovels can be read as studies not only of political or other real-life situations, but of the narrative self, and the construction of narrative identity. … The process of narrative construction is readily observable in modern novels; novels are prime instances of the development of character, and many novels 'discuss,' implicitly or, increasingly, explicitly the idea of authorship. Novels also suggest, by way of content and structure, style and techniques, the narrative form as such, that disorder is not necessarily dys-

27 Stuart Hall, "Introduction: Who Needs Identity," in *Questions of Cultural Identity*, ed. Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay (London, Thousand Oaks, and New Delhi: Sage, 1998), 4.

> functional, for the person *or* the socio-political order or for the relationship between the two.[28]

In other words, beyond the mimetic representation of the narrative processes that shape their individual characters' identities, novels as such can be read as identity discourse in a more generic sense. That is to say, as narrative in its most sublimated form, concerned precisely with representing the whole of reality and experience, novels emulate the very strategies and formats of identity formation, and, more broadly, of "making sense" that are present in a given culture at a given time.

It is precisely this quality of the novel that fascinated the Russian literary scholar Mikhail Bakhtin, whose theory of the novel met with enormous interest after his work was translated into English—much of it posthumously. Central to Bakthin's theory of the novel is his very particular understanding of language and how language shapes our sense of reality.[29] For Bakhtin, language is at root a social phenomenon that exists only by the grace of dialogue. People make sense of the world through language, yet because language is inherently "dialogic," it is not stable. Not only are there multiple languages, but languages continually change: words and utterances never mean exactly the same thing because they exist only in dialogue, which are necessarily situated in specific temporal and geographical circumstances and necessarily involve specific people. Language, then, mediates our experience of reality as an ever incomplete, dialogic, historical and ongoing process. And it is from such a perspective that Bakthin considers the novel as the artistic form most capable of representing reality—or rather, the way people make sense of reality through language—precisely because he sees novels as linguistic constructs eminently attuned to linguistic diversity and change, ever trying to capture the diversity of language use.[30] Indeed, in his essay "Epic and Novel," Bakhtin characterizes the novel as the "sole genre that continues to develop, that

28 Maureen Whitebrook, *Identity, Narrative and Politics* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), 15–16.

29 Mikhail M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* (Austin: University of Texas Press: 1990).

30 As Michael Holquist explains, "[o]ther genres are constituted by a set of formal features for fixing language that pre-exist any specific utterance within the genre. Language, in other words, is assimilated to form. The novel by contrast seeks to shape its form to languages; it has a completely different relationship to languages from other genres since it constantly experiments with new shapes in order to display the variety and immediacy of speech diversity." Holquist, introduction to *The Dialogic Imagination* by Mikhail M. Bakhtin, xxix.

is as yet uncompleted," in contrast with other, older genres, like the epic, which have crystallized and become fixed.[31] Whereas these "finished" genres have been transmitted into the present as an inheritance from an ultimately pre-historic past, the novel, Bakhtin suggests, is "deeply akin" to the present and similarly incomplete historical era (4). That is to say, the essentially protean nature of the novel, its ability to renew itself continuously and to parody and absorb all other discursive genres, the ways in which the novel operates through a process of continuous becoming and thereby actively resists canonization and fixation: all these elements, which Bakthin sees as key characteristics of the novel, reflect the ongoing, ever incomplete nature of the present itself.[32]

It is precisely through this emphasis on the fundamental incompleteness of the novel that Bakhtin establishes a function for the novel in which it assumes a much greater cultural relevance and significance than is usually allowed:

> [t]he novel is the only developing genre and therefore it reflects more deeply, more essentially, more sensitively and rapidly, reality itself in the process of its unfolding. Only that which is itself developing can comprehend development as a process. The novel has become the leading hero in the drama of literary development in our time precisely because it best of all reflects the tendencies of a new world still in the making; it is, after all, the only genre born of this new world and in total affinity with it. (7)

To be sure, Bakhtin is not naively valorizing a poetics of realism, but suggests, much more radically, that the novel as a genre, or rather, a force, enacts the continually changing and historically distinct ways in which reality is made sense of. In fact, he even suggests that "only in the novel have we the possibility of an authentically objective portrayal of the past as the past. Contemporary reality with its new experiences is retained as a way of seeing, it has the depth, sharpness, breadth and vividness peculiar to that way of seeing" (29–30). What this does not mean is that the novel functions as a mirror that offers an objective, crystal clear, and completed

31 Mikhail M. Bakhtin, "Epic and Novel," in *The Dialogic Imagination*, 3. Hereafter cited in the text.

32 Incidentally, Bakhtin points out that it is because of their attempt to canonize and "fix" the novel that most supposedly comprehensive theories of the novel are defective: because they validate only one type of novel and underestimate the genre's fundamentally protean nature, they have only been partial, incomplete theories, simply waiting to be superseded (7–9). It is for the same reason that the normative definitions of Holocaust literature, valorizing testimony or avant-garde aesthetics at the cost of other forms and styles, are ultimately inadequate.

image of (past) reality. On the contrary, Bakhtin is suggesting something much more complex. The novel does not so much capture reality or the past and fix it, like a photograph might try to do. It rather evokes it as an ongoing, ever-inconclusive process, and in all its indeterminate complexity—indeed, as a "structure of feeling," as Raymond Williams might have it.[33] And the novel does this by creating, in and through language, a virtual but nonetheless living dialogue between reader, author (or narrator), and characters, that emulates precisely the ongoing process through which we make sense of the world. Thus, the novel facilitates what might be termed a vicarious experience of reality or history, precisely because the dialogical process on which it operates is essentially incomplete and open-ended.[34]

Bakhtin's theory of the novel is infinitely richer and more complex than I can do justice to here. Yet even this brief discussion suggests some of the more complex ways in which the Jewish American novels under discussion here represent Jewish American identity. Indeed, if it is assumed, following current thinking about identity, that identity is constructed in and by narrative, a Bakhtinian perspective would credit these novels with particular significance: they not only reflect on the reality of Jewish American identity through their narrative representation of characters, but also and much more significantly through their generic quality *as novels*. That is to say, it is precisely as novels that they enact or perform the (linguistic, narrative) reality of the contemporary Jewish American experience in all its historical contingency and incompleteness. A critical reading of such novels tries to capture and contain the salient aspects of that experience and thereby inevitably reduces some of the open-endedness of the novel that Bakhtin so values. Yet criticism may also be conducted precisely as a dialogical encounter, intended to construct illuminating and compelling

33 Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 128–135. As was briefly discussed in chapter 2 of this study, Williams uses this term to refer to the ways in which reality itself is experienced as an ongoing and open-ended process, in contrast to the ways in which scholars of history and culture tend to study reality or the past as a completed entity.

34 Or as Bakhtin puts it, this open-ended, dialogical encounter fostered by the novel

> leads to radical changes in the structuring of the artistic image. The image acquires a specific actual existence. It acquires a relationship—in one form or another, to one degree or another—to the ongoing event of current life in which we, the author and readers, are intimately participating. This creates the radically new zone for structuring images in the novel, a zone of maximally close contact between the represented object and contemporary reality in all its inconclusiveness. (30–31)

but ever contingent and shifting significations. It is in this spirit that I wish to focus on the fictional representation of Jewish histories: from my perspective, it is in such histories that Krauss, Englander, Foer, and Chabon make the fullest use of the diversity of significations available to them and that they most powerfully portray the most "novel" dimensions of Jewish American identity.

In fact, an interest and concern with Jewish history is an often-noted and salient aspect of this contemporary Jewish American writing. Arguably, it is to no small extent through their explorations of Jewish history that the novels of Foer, Krauss, Englander, and Chabon engage with matters of "Jewishness" and that they manifest themselves as Jewish (or Jewish American) fiction. Strikingly, however, the history of the Holocaust often offers a central point of orientation on these authors' imaginative travels to places and times far removed from present-day Jewish American reality. Moreover, these authors as often as not take great liberties in imagining these Jewish histories, bespeaking what might be called a postethnic sensibility toward them, or, a willingness to give shape to them in self-consciously unorthodox, and flexible ways. Significantly, then, this seemingly impious, Holocaust-centered approach to Jewish history and culture at the same time also appears to reinvigorate that very same tradition, thus enabling a sense of Jewish renewal.

In what follows, I intend to juxtapose three very different Jewish histories which approach the historical record with progressively more artistic license. In all of them, however, the history of the Holocaust poses as a central anchor point. First, in Englander's *The Ministry of Special Cases*, the Holocaust offers a largely implicit though unmistakable interpretative grid to a more or less "grounded" historical fiction—that is, a fictional narrative that remains relatively faithful to historically verifiable facts. In that sense, Englander's approach is still relatively conventional, using a Holocaust-inflected framework in order to represent in fiction another, not well-known but real Jewish history. Foer's *Everything Is Illuminated*, however, emphasizes that as a result of the destruction wrought by the Holocaust, not only people were irrevocably lost, but also their histories. Foer uses this fact as a pretext to radically invent and imagine *in fiction* his grandfather's Ukrainian shtetl that was irrevocably lost to history. He thereby turns on its head the common tropes that have described the Holocaust as an insurmountable void, but at the same time reawakens and claims as his own an established Jewish literary and cultural tradition. Finally, in *The Yiddish Policemen's Union*, a novel that in the context of this chapter merits a discussion at somewhat greater length, Michael

Chabon cuts all cords with the historical record by imagining a reality that never was, but where the Holocaust functions as an important turning point between actual history and this alternative history. As with Foer, this radically fictional strategy enables Chabon to imaginatively (re)connect with a Jewish cultural heritage.

The fondness for Jewish history on the part of the new wave of Jewish American writing is in fact more accurately described as a fondness for *Eastern European* Jewish history. In that respect, Nathan Englander's situating *The Ministry of Special Cases* in Argentina at the time of the Dirty War is a somewhat unusual move. However, from the depiction of the darkening political mood in Argentina to Kaddish and Lillian's experience of state terror as parents and as Jews, the ways in which Englander gives fictional shape to this Argentinian history are highly familiar to the contemporary Jewish American imagination. If Kaddish and Lillian experience these events through a historically ingrained sense of Jewish vulnerability, the reader, additionally, is confronted with close structural parallels with other histories of twentieth century totalitarianism, the Holocaust clearly being its most well-known manifestation. Indeed, many implicit and explicit references to the Holocaust are scattered throughout the novel. All of this is not to say that *The Ministry of Special Cases* suggests that the Argentinian Dirty War is "another Holocaust." However, it is precisely by representing it—through the story of the Poznan family—as a Holocaust-inflected Jewish history that this relatively distant, unfamiliar South American history becomes comprehensible. In other words, the novel makes use of a frightfully familiar repertoire of events, experiences, and allusions to render meaningful and urgent a much less well-known episode in recent (Jewish) history.

In his description of the political developments in Argentina during the mid-1970s and the way in which Kaddish and Lillian experience them, Englander evokes a grim and volatile atmosphere that recalls, often implicitly and sometimes explicitly, the more well-known histories of twentieth century totalitarianism, especially Nazism. For instance, the army becomes a visible and threatening presence in the streets of Englander's Buenos Aires, gunshots can sometimes be heard at night, and intellectuals and students—many of them Jews—start disappearing and are never heard from again, while murdered bodies appear in various places. These events "dialogically" bring to mind developments in Nazi Germany: the appearance of Hitler's brown-shirts, the violence committed against innocent civilians, mostly Jews, and later, the implementation of terror as government policy. As Dr. Mazursky says to Kaddish, after the latter has

told him about the disappearance of Pato, "[t]o kidnap the innocents, to take revenge on them—we've seen enough of that in this century. Too many are blameless. And too many are Jews" (180). Even before Pato's disappearance, Kaddish and Lillian already feared for his safety, because their son has radical leftist political views as well as a number of—in the contemporary context—dangerous and subversive books. They argue with him, pressing him to get rid of the books, and significantly, their discussion echoes with memories of the Holocaust. Pato is disgusted with his parents' suggestion of getting rid of his books: "[t]hey're supposed to burn banned books in the street. That's how it's done, with big bonfires and evil intent. This is the only ruthless, coercive system that expects us to destroy them ourselves" (99). Shortly afterwards Pato is arrested because of his books, which includes one about "a fellow Argentine living in Jerusalem ten years down the line" (148), which can only be Hannah Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. Earlier, Kaddish had himself burnt a copy of Hitler's *Mein Kampf* (114). Though these book titles and other references to Nazi Germany and the Holocaust may be minor and oblique, Englander clearly invites his readers to make the connection between his Argentina at the time of the Dirty War and these more familiar histories of totalitarianism, Nazism, and the Holocaust.

Though Englander never goes as far as to present the Dirty War as "another Holocaust," it becomes progressively clear that this history belongs in a well-established twentieth century tradition of totalitarian terror. Thus, it is not only a parental loss that Kaddish and Lillian suffer after the arrest of Pato and their unsuccessful attempts to get him back. At the same time, their ordeal is significant also as a paradigmatic twentieth century history: an uncomfortably familiar story of victimization, depersonalization, and powerlessness against totalitarian forces. When Lillian makes an enormous racket after the arrest of her son, crying and beating her fists, this would normally cause a reaction from the neighbors, but now nothing happens. Like the neighbors of the arrested did in Germany and occupied Europe during the Holocaust, those in the new Argentina stand by passively: "[w]hen people hear noise they didn't make more. They stopped what they were doing and turned their eyes to the floor. And, more and more, they kept on with their business. The neighbors heard nothing, no matter how loud" (150). Desperate to get back her son, Lillian wants to engage the services of the dreaded Ministry of Special Cases, even though Kaddish warns her that they will end up "roaming that building with the rest of the hopeless people who aren't getting their kids back" (202). And indeed, Kaddish and Lillian soon run into one impenetrable paper wall

after another and get more and more entangled in a truly Kafkaesque battle with state bureaucracy. Ultimately, it comes to seem as if Pato has simply disappeared into thin air—a metaphor that may be chillingly close to the truth. Lillian feels that this is "just punishment" for the job Kaddish has been doing: "[a]ll those Benevolent Self bodies buried in no-name graves. And for us the name is all we have left" (281). In fact, by having only a name left, Kaddish and Lillian join a large contingent of parents (and other relatives) of the disappeared, who lost their loved ones without trace in a century of totalitarian and genocidal violence.

These totalitarian echoes become more specifically Holocaust-inflected and start to reverberate even more strongly after Kaddish and Lillian give up their pointless efforts with the state bureaucracy, and they each choose to follow their own desperate intuitions. Lillian decides to seek help with the Jews of Buenos Aires, in whom Kaddish long lost any faith. She goes to visit Feigenblum, the Jews' most powerful representative, and when she enters his office, she notices that "[c]losest to Feigenblum's desk—to keep him full of humility and lest he never forget—was a yellow Jude star, pinned to velvet in a mahogany case" (291). Feigenblum explains to Lillian that he can help: his organization has a list of all the Jewish disappeared, which has some sort of official status. However, it turns out that Pato's name cannot simply be added to the list. As Feigenblum explains, it is "a list as registered with the government. There is a protocol. They approve every name on it" (297). Recognizing this for the farce it is, Lillian responds by saying that "[y]ou work with them, Feigenblum. You channel the grand tradition of Jewish diplomacy: Never acknowledge catastrophe until it's done" (298).[35] Lillian clearly feels that Feigenblum and his organization are copies of the infamous *Judenräte* of the ghettoes of World War II. And in what reads like a veiled critique of the postwar culture of memory, Lillian throws at Feigenblum that

> [a]fterward you'll raise up a tall building around it. You'll enlist a great Jewish after-the-fact army to fight with all of hell's fury over how it is to be remembered. … You'll deal with the very same officials. … You'll fight bravely over how many of our dead they'll agree to list on the monument. … What it means, Feigenblum, is that I want my son, my Pato, home alive. Not the Museum of the Jewish Disappeared. (299)

For his part, Kaddish is put in touch through Dr. Mazursky with a shady character called Victor Wollensky, who used to be a navigator in the navy.

35 In this regard, it is interesting to note that Feigenblum's name can be translated not only as "fig flower" but also as "flower of cowardice."

This man knows what happens to the disappeared youths, as he admits that he himself is "the monster that tosses them into the sea" (322). Wollensky tries to tell the world his story of atrocity, but, like a Jan Karski or a Rudolf Vrba during World War II, finds that nobody will listen; after all, Wollensky says, the story is "[s]o far fetched, so impossible and unbelievable a claim, made by such a foul stinking man" (323).[36] Kaddish, though, decides to believe Wollensky and concludes that Pato is dead. Yet this does not make things any easier, because when he subsequently wishes to mourn the loss of his son properly and according to Jewish tradition, the Rabbi refuses to acknowledge the legitimacy of his mourning since there is no body. Whereas earlier, the government bureaucracy was unable to work on Pato's case because there was no *habeas corpus*, Kaddish is now doubly frustrated, since he cannot mourn for the loss of his son without there being an actual corpse. In a way, Kaddish finds himself in a similar situation to relatives of Holocaust victims of whom nothing remained but ashes in unidentified Polish fields. Though Kaddish and Lillian take very different paths, both of these paths resonate with the memory of the Holocaust.

Though the resonance of the Holocaust in Nathan Englander's *The Ministry of Special Cases* is powerful and significant, it would be too simplistic to regard the novel simply as a kind of Holocaust allegory, as that would obscure the fact that the novel's principal concern is the story of an almost ordinary Jewish family in a distant country, entangled in a highly situational, horrible, though relatively unfamiliar history. Yet it is precisely by representing the story of this Jewish family in Argentina at the time of the Dirty War through the prism of an acute consciousness of the memory of the Holocaust (and totalitarianism more generally) that Englander is able to transcend the relative situational "limitations" of his material. That is to say, it is as a Holocaust-inflected narrative about the historically confined experiences of an Argentinean Jewish family that *The Ministry of Special Cases* achieves meaning and relevance as a *Jewish American* novel. By the same token, this also reflects upon the rich imaginative possibilities of the memory of the Holocaust within the Jewish experience. The

36 Jan Karski was a Polish resistance fighter who traveled to London in 1942 to inform the Polish and allied governments of the policies of destruction committed by the Germans against the Jews. His reports, based on his personal observations in the Warsaw Ghetto and Belzec extermination camp, were not believed and not acted upon. The same goes for a report about Auschwitz that was written by Rudolf Vrba, a Slovak Jew who managed to escape from this camp in 1944. Karski and Vrba achieved some measure of fame after they were both interviewed by Claude Lanzmann in his monumental documentary *Shoah* (1985).

presence of the Holocaust in *The Ministry of Special Cases* appears not as a superficial historical parallel intended for sentimental effect or high sales, but rather as an inherent element of the fictional construct that is Englander's Argentina. Indeed, *The Ministry of Special Cases* embodies and enacts the ways in which the memory of the Holocaust may function within sophisticated processes of (self-)representation that can be much more expansive than the act of remembrance itself.

Whereas in *The Ministry of Special Cases* the familiar historical facts of the Holocaust offer a framework of reference by which other, less familiar historical facts can be imagined fictionally, in Jonathan Safran Foer's *Everything Is Illuminated* they offer the premise to a more radical fictional engagement with Jewish history. In fact, assuming a very liberal, what might be called postethnic attitude towards matters of Jewishness, Jonathan completely invents his own Jewish family history. This invented Jewish history is profoundly Holocaust-centered in the paradoxical sense that it is constructed around a fundamental absence that exists between the Holocaust and Foer's novel. As mentioned before, Jonathan is notably unable on his trip to Ukraine to uncover any tangible connections to the place where his family came from, and instead, he is confronted with an overwhelming sense of absence of people, things, and indeed history. It is precisely for that reason that Jonathan takes it upon himself in his chapters of the novel to fully imagine and invent a history of the shtetl of Trachimbrod. Because that history effectively ended with the Holocaust, those catastrophic events themselves are almost entirely absent in Jonathan's history, even if they are its central motivator. Consequently, then, Jonathan's Trachimbrod history is a postethnic Jewish American narrative about Jewish history, culture, and identity; yet paradoxically it is also a fundamentally Holocaust-centered story, even though it is not primarily about the Holocaust.

For Jonathan, writing a fictional history of Trachimbrod is a way of imagining for himself a family history and constructing a sense of identity. At the same time, however, it is also a much more expansive and capacious endeavor, connecting Jonathan to an (imagined) Eastern European history. The very first chapter of Jonathan's history recounts the story of an accident of a certain Trachim, who rode into the river Brod with his wagon. Shortly after this accident, a baby girl rises to the surface of the river alive and well. She will be named Brod, after the river. The story of Trachim's accident and the miraculous birth of Brod constitute the myth of origin of the shtetl *and* of Jonathan himself, as it is to Brod that he traces his ancestry. By thus interconnecting his private myth of origin

with that of Trachimbrod, Jonathan commits his effort of constructing a family history and thereby a personal sense of identity to a broader project that encompasses the history of the shtetl as a whole. Indeed, the story of Trachimbrod is inseparable from the story of Jonathan's family: Trachimbrod never forgot what happened on the bank of the Brod on that fateful day in 1791. Almost a hundred and fifty years after the event, Jonathan's grandfather Safran still tells his girlfriend the "Gypsy girl" "the story of his great-great-great-grandmother's tragic life," as well as that of "Trachim's wagon, when the young W twins were the first to see the curious flotsam rising to the surface" (233). And vice versa, in the process of constructing his family history through recounting the lives of his distant ancestor Brod and his grandfather Safran, Jonathan at the same time imaginatively resurrects the entire shtetl of Trachimbrod.

And therefore, even if Brod and Safran are the most important characters in Jonathan's Trachimbrod tale, it might in fact be argued that it is Trachimbrod itself—its history, its culture, its mythology—that is the real protagonist of these chapters. In fact, Jonathan regularly wanders from the narrow path of his own family's history and into the thickets of Trachimbrod's larger history. Thus, at one point, he devotes a few pages to explaining the curious origins of the rift between the shtetl's two Jewish congregations, the Uprighters and the Slouchers. Also, histories that are more central to the plot are often embellished with bizarre and fantastic detail. For instance, Jonathan recounts that in the days after the tragic accident of Trachim, both Slouchers and Uprighters appeal in writing to the Well-Regarded Rabbi to be allowed to bring up the baby girl, who is temporarily placed in the Upright synagogue's ark. The Well-Regarded Rabbi, unable to make a choice, then puts all the letters in the baby's crib, and waits for her to pick a letter herself. After two days, however, the smell of the baby becomes so bad that the Rabbi is forced to act. When he opens the ark, "a most terrible stench poured forth, an all-encompassing, impossible to overlook, inhuman and inexcusable stink of supreme repugnance. It flooded from the ark, swept through the synagogue, streamed down every street, every alleyway of the shtetl … and drained, finally, into the Brod" (22). (Yet the baby is clutching a note: Yankel is to be her father.)

Such colorful anecdotes highlight that Jonathan's chapters situate Trachimbrod not within the bounds of dispassionate history, but rather in the foggy realms of folklore and myth. But whereas Jonathan's fictional portrait of Trachimbrod does not resemble in any way the historical reality of life in an Eastern Galician shtetl between pre-modern times and the 1940s, it does, however, pay tribute—though hardly with any sense of piety—

to a well-established *literary* reality. Indeed, Jonathan/Foer freely makes use of all sorts of literary examples and traditions: the folksy portrayal of the shtetl Trachimbrod that I have briefly illustrated harkens back to the Yiddish storytelling tradition of such figures as Sholem Aleichem and Isaac Bashevis Singer, as well as to "Fiddler on the Roof," its influential Broadway and Hollywood counterpart. Furthermore, the host of eccentric characters and their often quite bizarre behavior seems heavily indebted to the Polish Jewish modernist Bruno Schulz. And the peculiar ahistorical setting of Trachimbrod, a place where the most incredible things are the order of the day, is an example of the magical realism that was pioneered so successfully by South American authors.[37] In fact, Trachimbrod seems modeled after one of the magical realists' most famous locations: Gabriel García Márquez's town of Macondo in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*.[38] Finally, through his knowing deployment of the characteristics and strategies of all these literary predecessors, as well as his more formal play with genre and typography, Jonathan asserts himself as profoundly influenced by postmodernism.[39]

Because of the fact that the Trachimbrod chapters offer an essentially mythical tale, unmistakably modeled after a literary reality rather than a historical one, the significance of Jonathan's narrative is to be located not on a level of actuality but on that of allegory.[40] These allegories explore, on the one hand, the moral values of love, family, and community, and on the other, the epistemological issue of how these values are *constructed* and *mediated* by memory and narrative. In fact, for that reason, I would suggest that these allegories may be characterized as *postethnic* allegories. Most of the key elements of Jonathan's allegories recur in his history of "The Dial." This history commences with Brod's husband the "Kolker," who works at

37 Incidentally, magical realism is also the strategy in the Trachimbrod chapters that channels and gives shape to a distinct preoccupation with copulation, masturbation, and, to a lesser extent, defecation, though I would suggest that some of the origins of these interests may well be traced back to those popular heroes of the 1990s, Beavis and Butthead.

38 Menachem Feuer, "Almost Friends: Post-Holocaust Comedy, Tragedy, and Friendship in Jonathan Safran Foer's *Everything Is Illuminated*," *Shofar* 25, no. 2 (Winter 2007): 37, doi: 10.1353/sho.2007.0020.

39 Some of the most eye-catching examples of Jonathan's formal play with genre and form are his use of the format of a play script (172–177), the insertion of a flowchart (259), as well as a page and a half where he repeats the same phrase "[*w*]e *are writing...*" over and over again (212–213), and a page and a half where he places only dots and a few scattered phrases (270–271).

40 Menachem Feuer, for instance, suggests that each chapter of Jonathan's tale is "an allegory of sorts." Feuer, "Almost Friends," 37.

the Trachimbrod flour mill. One fateful day he is involved in an accident and ends up with a saw blade stuck in his head. Though the Kolker miraculously survives the accident, his character is unalterably changed, and he does not live very long afterwards. In order to console the grieving Brod, the Kolker's colleagues at the flour mill have a bronze statue made of their former colleague, which they have placed in the shtetl's square. Because of the saw blade, the statue functions rather accurately as a sundial, but more importantly, the Trachimbroders consider it a powerful symbol of luck. As such, the Dial and its story assume an important position in Trachimbrod's folklore and traditions, and through the years, "[s]o many visitors came to rub and kiss different parts of him for the fulfillment of their various wishes that his entire body had to be rebronzed every month." (140). However, after every rebronzing, the appearance of the Dial changes. In fact, "[f]or each recasting, the craftsmen modeled the Dial's face after the faces of his male descendants—reverse heredity" (140). And so, when on his wedding day Jonathan's grandfather Safran feels that he has gotten older and "was growing to look like his great-great-great-grandfather, what he really saw was that his great-great-great-grandfather was beginning to look like him. His revelation was just how much like himself he looked" (140). Or, as the allegory might be interpreted, representation—of ancestors, of community, of history—is always *self*-representation.

Of course, this allegory about the representation of fathers and the representation of the past also pertains to Jonathan's own story of Trachimbrod. Like the later bronzers of the Dial who had no idea of the original looks of the Kolker, the actual, present day Trachimbrod confronts Jonathan with an almost complete absence that he is unable to counterbalance by any conventional historiographical effort. Therefore, he finds an alternative way of understanding and making sense of Trachimbrod's past precisely by filling the historical void with fantastic, larger than life allegories and inventions. Consequently, the further Jonathan's fictional Trachimbrod advances into recent history and toward its own violent conclusion, or rather, the closer Jonathan's narrative approaches the abyss represented by the Holocaust, the more fantastic it becomes.[41] Hence, the character

41 Francisco Collado-Rodriguez points out that "Jonathan's presentation of events imposes a cyclical understanding of life centered on the notion that things will necessarily deteriorate as time advances until the cycle comes to its end. Accordingly, the mythical fable of Trachimbrod's life and prosperity … becomes progressively saturated with magical-realist elements." Francisco Collado-Rodriguez, "Ethics in the Second Degree: Trauma and Dual Narratives in Jonathan Safran Foer's *Everything Is Illuminated*," *Journal of Modern Literature* 32, no. 1 (Fall 2008): 58, doi: 10.1353/

of Safran, Jonathan's grandfather, of whose actual biography it might be supposed that Jonathan is at least marginally aware, is actually one of the most bizarre of Jonathan's creations. For instance, from the age of ten, Safran's life is marked by an astounding succession of sexual exploits that most prominently (though not exclusively) involve servicing the widows and old maids of Trachimbrod. In Jonathan's story, Safran is the fulcrum between history and fiction. He is the character within closest historical reach, and at once forever beyond it; he is the character that might have been portrayed most accurately, but then even such a portrayal would always have been a fiction. And so, as if to underscore that fact, it is Safran of all characters who becomes the vessel to contain Jonathan's wildest fantasies. Ultimately, the fact that the historical Safran is not allowed to interfere with the way Jonathan wants to imagine either him or Trachimbrod is also the most powerful symbol of the postethnic sensibility that informs Jonathan's Trachimbrod history. After all, David Hollinger's "postethnic perspective challenges the right of one's grandfather or grandmother to determine primary identity," emphasizing instead the right of individuals to freely construct and give shape to their own ethnic identities within the parameters available to them.[42]

If Jonathan/Foer feels free to revive fictionally what was destroyed historically and to exercise a postethnic sensibility in giving shape to that re-constructed world, his imaginings ultimately cannot undo or halt the course of history. In Jonathan's account no less than in reality, Trachimbrod is destroyed during the Holocaust, and fiction is unavoidably overtaken and subsumed by history. However, it is precisely this ultimate primacy of history that is, in a fictional sense, denied by Michael Chabon's *The Yiddish Policemen's Union*. For Chabon as well as for Jonathan, the Holocaust is an inevitable chapter of history, but whereas in Jonathan's narrative it is the necessary conclusion of his fiction, in *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* it is the starting point for, precisely, a fiction. Written in the gritty style of a Chandlerian crime novel, *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* presents an alternative version of history that hinges upon a different outcome of the Holocaust: after the American government granted the Jews of Europe a safe haven in—of all places—Alaska, the Nazis were able

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jml.0.0028. I would agree with Collado-Rodriguez, yet I would insist that the progressively more fantastic nature of the narrative must be seen in close relation to the imminent approach of Trachimbrod's destruction, which Jonathan feels unable to represent in a realistic mode.

42 David A. Hollinger, *Postethnic America: Beyond Multiculturalism* (New York: BasicBooks, 1995), 116.

to murder only two million Jews, instead of six. And in this alternative history, the fledgling state of Israel was destroyed by the Arabs only three months after its proclamation of independence, while the Jewish Federal District of Sitka, Alaska, developed into a kind of autonomous though rundown North American shtetl where the language spoken is not English or Hebrew, but Yiddish. However, sixty years later, the prospects for the Jews of Sitka are not good, as the US government is about to disband their Alaskan safe haven. And it is with the backdrop of the soon approaching "Reversion" that the novel tells the story of homicide detective Meyer Landsman, a divorced alcoholic, who tries to solve the mysterious murder of Mendel Shpilman, a child prodigy turned junkie. While working on this case and accompanied by generous amounts of rain, alcohol, and tobacco smoke, Landsman and his half-Indian partner Berko Shemets stumble upon a major terrorist complot. Run by ultra-Orthodox Jews from Sitka and directed by top echelons of the US government, including its evangelical president, this plot is aimed at bombing the Dome of the Rock, an important Muslim shrine located in Jerusalem.

A rich and provocative novel that resonates strongly with historical parallels from the early years of the twenty-first century, such as 9/11, terrorism, and religious fundamentalism, *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* has garnered a considerable amount of critical attention. Newspaper reviewers generally received the novel very positively while literary scholars have considered it a pertinent example in reflections on such various topics as the genre of alternative history, post-9/11 culture, as well as racial relations in America.[43] My own interest in the novel, obviously, is its particularly Jewish dimension—especially the way it imagines a purely fictional Jewish history. It is, however, precisely this Jewish content of the novel that has provoked a number of scholars and has led them to raise some serious reservations about it. For instance, noted expert on Jewish literature Ruth Wisse calls Chabon's novel in a review a "deliberate and sustained act of provocation." She criticizes the anti-Zionist "message" that inheres in the intimate atmosphere Chabon's extended use of Yiddish evokes and bemoans Chabon's

43 Consider for instance Margaret Scanlan, "Strange Times to Be a Jew: Alternative History After 9/11," *Modern Fiction Studies* 57, no. 3 (Fall 2011): 505–531, doi: 10.1353/mfs.2011.0067; Adam Rovner, "Alternate History: The Case of Nava Semel's *IsraIsland* and Michael Chabon's *The Yiddish Policemen's Union*," *Partial Answers* 9, no. 1 (January 2011): 131–152, doi: 10.1353/pan.2011.0004; Sarah Phillips Casteel, "Jews Among the Indians: The Fantasy of Indigenization in Mordecai Richler's and Michael Chabon's Northern Narratives," *Contemporary Literature* 50, no. 4 (Winter 2009): 775–810, doi: 10.1353/cli.0.0082.

referencing of Jewish history: "[m]errily conscripting Jewish cultural heroes to the purposes of his own farce, Chabon chops them down to his own size, and with them everything they represent."[44] In his review, Alvin Rosenfeld, a scholar of Jewish and Holocaust literature no less eminent than Wisse, acknowledges and is interested in the fact that *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* touches upon issues "of history and destiny, exile and redemption, morality and identity." However, he feels that Chabon's treatment of these matters suffers from a "lack of intellectual depth [that] is glaring, particularly given the weight of his ostensible subject here: the fate of what remains of the Jews in the aftermath of the Holocaust and the demise of Israel."[45] Finally, the critic D.G. Myers is troubled particularly by the Yiddish dimension of the novel: "Chabon's access to Yiddish is less than authoritative. Although Chabon seeks to create a world that is linguistically intact—Yiddishland in Alaska—his style slips repeatedly, and he just gets things wrong." Ultimately, however, it is not so much ignorance of Yiddish that Myers faults Chabon with, but an illegitimate use of the language. According to Myers, "Chabon has not created a linguistically intact world where Jews yak away happily again in Yiddish, but only a polemical contraption for slashing at the cruelties and inevitable failures of the world he calls the greater Creation."[46] In short, within the confines of Jewish American literary studies, there are some strong reservations about what are perceived to be the novel's anti-Zionist stance, a superficial, inauthentic engagement with Jewish culture, and its flawed representation of Yiddish. In my view, however, such dismissals misconstrue the nature of what Chabon is trying to accomplish, which is emphatically *not* to write a novel about Yiddishkeit—that is, Eastern European Jewish history and culture—as Isaac Bashevis Singer would write it. Instead, I would suggest that *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* is motivated on the one hand by a postethnic orientation toward Jewishness as well as a keen awareness of the destruction wrought by the Holocaust on the other. And from that perspective, the significance of Chabon's novel as both a product of Jewish American culture and an engagement with Jewish culture lies not in its adherence to actuality but precisely in its indulgence in fabrication and its willingness to invent.

44 Ruth R. Wisse, "Slap Shtick," review of *The Yiddish Policemen's Union*, by Michael Chabon, *Commentary* 124, no. 1 (July-August 2007): 74, 75, 76.

45 Alvin H. Rosenfeld, "Touching on History and Destiny," review of *The Yiddish Policemen's Union*, by Michael Chabon, *The New Leader* 90, no. 3/4 (May-August 2007): 35.

46 D.G. Myers, "Michael Chabon's Imaginary Jews," *Sewanee Review* 116, no. 4 (Fall 2008): 585, 587, doi: 10.1353/sew.0.0074.

As Chabon explains at length in "Imaginary Homelands," published in his 2008 collection of essays *Maps and Legends*, the origins of *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* go back to the 1990s when Chabon stumbled upon a copy of a 1958 phrasebook entitled *Say It in Yiddish* by Uriel and Beatrice Weinreich. Chabon was profoundly baffled by the phrasebook because its implied purpose was to be a practical resource on a trip to an actual destination. However, "[a]t what time in the history of the world," Chabon wondered, "was there a place of the kind that the Weinreichs imply, a place where not only the doctors and waiters and trolley conductors spoke Yiddish but also the airline clerks, travel agents, and casino employees?"[47] After the Holocaust, and after the embrace of Hebrew by Israel, *Say It in Yiddish* "seemed an entirely futile effort on the part of its authors, a gesture of embittered hope, of valedictory daydreaming, of a utopian impulse turned cruel and ironic" (177).[48] Chabon first published these ruminations in a 1997 essay, which caused something of a stir among scholars and enthusiasts of Yiddish. They felt slighted by the way in which Chabon seemed to locate Yiddish in the land of dead languages and charged him with ignorance about the continuing postwar persistence of the language. Chabon tried to defend himself with the argument that what fascinated him about the Weinreich's book was less the matter of the liveliness of Yiddish, but the irony that, at least to him, it "proposes a world that never was and might have been" (184). The matter continued to occupy his thoughts, and after some years, he resolved to "build myself a home in my imagination as my wife and I were making a home in the world. That idea led to the writing of my novel *The Yiddish Policemen's Union*, set … in a place where the Weinreich's phrase book would come in handy indeed" (191).

Interestingly, Chabon's choice to situate his imaginary Yiddishland in the unlikely location of Sitka, Alaska, is motivated by an actual plan of Franklin Roosevelt's Secretary of the Interior Harold Ickes, which, if it had been realized, could have resulted in the kind of place that Chabon fantasizes about. As Margaret Scanlan explains, a proposal to open up the US territory of Alaska to the endangered Jews of Europe was discussed at the instigation of Ickes during a 1940 hearing of the Senate Committee on

47 Michael Chabon, "Imaginary Homelands," in *Maps and Legends: Reading and Writing Along the Borderlands* (San Francisco: McSweeney's, 2008), 177. Hereafter cited in the text.

48 See also Michael Chabon, interview by The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, March 13, 2008, https://ushmm.org/museum/exhibit/focus/antisemitism/voices/transcript/index.php?content=20080313.

Territories of Insular Affairs.[49] The proposal never made it to Congress, due not least, as Scanlan points out, to the objections of Alaska's only and non-voting representative Anthony Dimond. But in Chabon's alternative history, Dimond was run over and killed by a taxi driver in Washington D.C. before the committee hearing took place, and because of that reason, it is to be supposed, the Alaskan Settlement Act was ultimately agreed upon. This act brought into existence the Federal District of Sitka and a home—if a temporary one—to the world's scattered Jewry in the days after the Holocaust and the annihilation of Israel.

Chabon's account of the Federal District of Sitka—population 3.2 million, mostly Jews who have been allowed to retain their language and culture and to do as they please within the confines of their district—is a Jewish history in the straightforward sense that it tells a story about Jewish people in a Jewish place doing Jewish things. As such, Chabon's Sitka is a richly imagined Jewish location. The streets of Sitka are named after great Jews (Peretz Street, Max Nordau Street, etc.) and are lined with such shops as KosherMart or Big Macher Outlet. Its cafes and restaurants bear such names as the Noz (frequented by policemen), Feter Shnayer, and the Polar-Shtern Kafeteria, which all serve delicacies such as stuffed cabbage, blintzes, and bagels—except Mabuhay Donuts, whose specialty is the famous and much-loved Sitka pastry, the "Filipino-style Chinese donut, or shtekeleh."[50] Sitka is also home to numerous Yiddish newspapers like the *Sitka Tog*, which has recently been distinguishing itself by publishing some of the most bizarre stories of Jewish interest, including one that reported that "amid the panic and feathers of a kosher slaughterhouse on Zhitlovsky Avenue, a chicken turned on the shochet as he raised his ritual knife and announced, in Aramaic, the imminent advent of the Messiah" (13). Another claim to fame of this Yiddish-American shtetl is the Sitka World Fair that was hosted in 1977, of which a beacon on Oysshtelung Island are the only sad remains, however. Finally, it is worth mentioning—for its value as a popular icon rather than its historic import—the District's favorite cartoon character, Shnapish the Dog.

An unexpected though essential dimension of Chabon's narrative portrait of Jewish Sitka, however, is that it is told through the medium of the hardboiled, "noir" detective novel—a genre much-loved by Chabon. In fact, while Chabon's detractors seem to consider this use of the tropes

49 Scanlan, "Alternative History After 9/11," 518.

50 Michael Chabon, *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* (London: Fourth Estate, 2007), 172. Hereafter cited in the text.

of detective fiction as damaging to the principal Jewish interest of the novel, it is not just an added bane or bonus to a supposedly purer Jewish history, but really an intrinsic part of the project. Again, the essay "Imaginary Homelands" provides some useful background. In some further reflections on his embroilment with the Yiddishists, Chabon relates his own fantasizing about a lost Yiddish-speaking world to the characteristically Jewish longing for irretrievable homelands, which in turn is related to "our innate human talent for nostalgia, to the aetataureate delusion, our false but certain collective human memory of a Golden Age."[51] And it is in relation to this realm of nostalgia that, for Chabon, an ardent defender of the literary delights of traditionally lowbrow genres, "genre fiction comes into the picture. Because when you are talking … about lands that can be found only in the imagination, you are really speaking my language—my *mamaloshen*."[52] It is precisely the medium of genre fiction, then, and in this case the hardboiled detective novel, that allows Chabon to connect with a Jewish culture and a language that is strange to him as a twenty-first century, post-acculturated Jewish American novelist. Indeed, like Foer's Jonathan, he cannot "authentically" inhabit this world except by a conscious imaginative effort, using a format that he does command and that through its sheer incongruity highlights its own invented nature. The result is a form of literary coalescence, where Chabon's hardboiled, short-clipped sentences tell a story that resonates strongly with Yiddishisms and Jewishly inflected metaphors.

Chabon's use of language offers the most striking example of how the novel engages with Yiddish and Yiddishkeit through imaginative, postethnic means. Like Jewish American writers of earlier generations, Chabon uses English to represent spoken Yiddish. However, whereas some of his illustrious forebears like Bellow and Malamud could rely on their actual knowledge of Yiddish to render in English some of its idiomatic flavor, Chabon, who does not have this background, employs a more deliberately imaginary and contextual approach that makes effective use of a repertoire of Yiddish current in popular culture. Thus the novel is inhabited by countless yids, patzers, shlossers, shtarkers, pishers, and ganefs, whose Yiddish is represented in an English full of—mostly invented—idioms. Cops are called latkes, after the pancake-shaped caps they wear; the word for detective is shammes, which comes from shamus, an actual Yiddish idiom used by Chandler as well (though the original meaning of the Yiddish word is

51 Chabon, "Imaginary Homelands," 187.

52 Ibid. Mamaloshen literally means mother tongue.

synogogue caretaker); Sitkans phone each other with a brand of cell phone called Shoyfer, as in shofar, the ram's horn blown on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur; and finally, an interesting translation is the word sholem (peace) for a gun, or a *piece* in much detective fiction.[53] Another effective technique that Chabon uses is to distinguish between native and non-native Yiddish speakers by representing the language of the latter in a kind of stilted English. For instance, the journalist Dennis Brennan, who once wrote a destructive article about Berko's father, says to Berko that "[a] need to repeat the rash threats of yore does not, I assure you, exist" (64). After some more of this, Berko responds by saying, "Brennan, please, I beg you to speak American" (65). Also, code-switching and swearing—often in combination—are frequently used means of suggesting that Yiddish is being spoken most of the time. Sitkan Jews are prone to saying such things as "[w]oe is me" (99), "a curse on him" (169), and to wish a "black year" upon things and people (371). But these curses are often complemented with expressions uttered in English. In fact, swear words ranking foremost among them, Sitkan Yiddish is interspersed with lots of American terms and phrases, and the narrator makes a point of emphasizing when things are said in "American."

"Sometimes funny, frequently sophomoric, Chabon's [linguistic] japes are geared to those who know about as much or as little as he does about European Jewry and its historic language—in other words, the bulk of his Jewish readership," Ruth Wisse notes with chagrin. In a similar vein, Alvin Rosenfeld writes that "apart from the use of awkward-sounding phrases like 'banging me a kettle all day long' and some two dozen Yiddish words, many of which by now have become part of colloquial American English … , the prose of this novel hardly resembles Yiddish at all."[54] However, one might wonder if the value of Chabon's novel ought to be sought in the extent to which it succeeds in providing an authentic and profound literary representation of the culture of European Jewry or a faithful rendition of the language of Yiddish. It seems to me that neither is a foremost concern of the novel at all. Written by a post-acculturated Jewish American novelist with little knowledge of Yiddish and read by an audience equally unversed in it, as I think Wisse rightfully surmises, it is small wonder and arguably for the better that Chabon's language does not attempt to resemble actual Yiddish in linguistic terms. Yet that does not take away from the fact that

53 These translations and etymologies are derived from Myers, "Michael Chabon's Imaginary Jews," 586.

54 Wisse, "Slap Shtick," 74–75; Rosenfeld, "Touching on History and Destiny," 36.

it constantly evokes and suggests it through description, image, allusion, and not least through those two dozen common American Yiddishisms. In fact, it is precisely by presenting itself as a hardboiled American crime fiction, narrating an alternative Jewish history, that the novel places itself in a location where this and other forms of considerable artistic license and imaginative freedom are not only permitted but also expected. And so, when Rosenfeld points out that Chabon's language suggest not Yiddish, but rather "the tough, cynical talk of detective fiction and the vulgarisms of the street," he is not so much identifying a shortcoming on the part of the novel, but rather his own failure to grasp the very mode in which the novel operates. Likewise, when D.G. Myers dismisses Chabon's representation of Yiddish for being "entirely imaginary," he fails to comprehend that this is precisely the point of the novel: it is precisely through the tropes of alternative history and crime fiction that Chabon is able imagine "a world that never was and might have been."[55]

But the coalescence of a distinctly Jewish perspective and the literary style of a hardboiled detective is manifested not only in the novel's use of language, but also in its atmosphere and plot. In the opening pages of the novel, for instance, Chabon establishes a setting and an atmosphere that is as Jewish as it is noir and pulpy. Indeed, true to tradition, the very first paragraph presents the murdered body of a heroin junkie in a room in the Hotel Zamenhof—a flophouse which is also the residence of Detective Meyer Landsman himself. At the moment the body is found, Landsman, the "most decorated shammes in the District of Sitka," is present in his room, off-duty, and drinking slivovitz from his 1977 Sitka World Fair shot glass while wearing a sholem—a Smith & Wesson Model 39—under his arm (2). After being called in by the night manager, Landsman has a look at the body and checks out the perimeter of the crime scene. Up on the roof of the hotel, he overviews the Sitka skyline: "[n]ight is an orange smear over Sitka, a compound of fog and the light of sodium-vapor streetlamps. It has the translucence of onions cooked in chicken fat" (9). A wonderful example of literary coalescence, this description of a dreary North American urban setting exists in a happy symbiosis with "schmaltzy" Jewish imagery.[56] After a more detailed inspection of the body and crime scene, Landsman discovers not much more than an unfinished game of chess and a pair of tefillin, or phylacteries, that the junkie used to tie off with.

55 Chabon, "Imaginary Homelands," 184.

56 I base my observation on Sarah Phillips Casteel, who writes that this passage "shifts seamlessly from the atmospheric language of the detective novel to a distinctively Jewish register of imagery." Casteel, "Jews Among the Indians," 798.

All the same, the tefillin lead Landsman and his partner Berko Shemets to hypothesize that the dead man may have at one point been a devout Jew, a member of one of the many sects of "black hats" in Sitka, while a visit to the local chess club confirms their suspicion. In fact, they now believe that their "yid" may have belonged to the blackest of black hats, the Verbover Hasidim: a sect of ultra-Orthodox Jews originally from Ukraine that, after being rooted out almost entirely during the Holocaust, established itself in Sitka and came to run a criminal empire.[57]

It is after Landsman and Berko's visit to the Island of Verbov that the novel's "Jewish plot" thickens, in two conceptually distinct but practically interconnected senses. Their visit to the Verbovers unexpectedly puts them on a course of investigation in which they ultimately uncover a Jewish *terrorist* plot. But as the reader follows Landsman and Berko working on these new dimensions of their case, the *novel's* plot is progressively infused with ever more Jewish cultural and religious elements. In fact, Landsman and Berko discover that their dead yid is Mendel Shpilman, the son of the Verbover Rebbe, a one-time child prodigy rumored to be the Tzaddik Ha-Dor, the "righteous man of his generation" (169). And in researching his past, they find out that Mendel had recently been treated in a state of the art facility carefully hidden in Peril Strait in the middle of "Indianer country." Run by Verbovers and financed by American Jews, this clinic is geared, as it turns out, to rehabilitate one single heroin-addict, once thought to be the Tzaddik Ha-Dor, as well as to farm a very special and rare breed of cows: pure red heifers. This combination is not as strange as it seems; in fact, it resonates strongly with Jewish cultural and religious significance. In a brief recap of Jewish eschatology, Berko explains to Landsman that "[w]hen the Temple in Jerusalem is restored … and it's time to make the traditional sin offering, the Bible says you need a particular kind of cow. A red heifer, without blemish. Pure. I guess they're pretty scarce"

57 As Chabon's narrator explains, the Verbovers are a "sacred gang" that "started out, back in the Ukraine, black hats like all the other black hats, scorning and keeping their distance from the trash and hoo-hah of the secular world. … Then the entire sect was burned in the fires of the Destruction, down to a hard, dense core of something blacker than any hat" (99). Only the ninth Verbover rebbe, the father in law of the present rebbe, and eleven of his disciples survived the Holocaust. This remnant ended up in the Federal District of Sitka, where the rebbe "found a way to remake the old-style black-hat detachment. He carried its logic to its logical end, the way evil geniuses do in cheap novels. He built a criminal empire that profited on the meaningless to-hubohu beyond the theoretical walls, on beings so flawed, corrupted, and hopeless of redemption that only cosmic courtesy led the Verbovers even to consider them human at all" (99).

(295). Moreover, he points out, it is thought by some that the Messiah will come with the restoration of the Temple. The pieces of the jigsaw are now coming together for Landsman too: "[s]o if you got hold of a red heifer, say. And you had all the tools ready, right? And the funny hats and stuff. And you, um, you built the Temple ... you could basically *force* Messiah to come?" (295, italics in original). In other words, Mendel and the red cows make up two ingredients in a powerful Jewish cocktail. However, the only problem is that on site in Jerusalem, the Muslim shrine of the Dome of the Rock is situated in the place where the Temple used to be. Landsman and Berko now understand that in order to rebuild the Temple and force the coming of the Messiah, the Verbovers, backed by an evangelist US government, are planning to bomb the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem. From this moment, Landsman and Berko's murder case develops into a more comprehensive investigation of a Biblically inspired Jewish terrorist plot that can be read as an "allo-historical" parallel to the 9/11 attacks. In short, then, Chabon's "Jewish plots," by fusing or coalescing popular American literary genres with Jewish cultural and religious repertoires, function to explore highly current (world-political) developments: international terrorism, religious fundamentalism, and the murky ways in ways in which US politics and government is connected or even implicated in both.[58]

Fascinating and important as this highly current dimension of *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* is, there is another subtext operating in the novel that is more central to my interests: the memory of the Holocaust. Of course, on a fundamental, structural level, *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* implicates actual history, as its reliance on the artifice of alternative history demands readers to imagine that the Holocaust as they know it had a very different outcome. Yet on the diegetic level of story as well, the Holocaust is a clearly discernible presence in Jewish Sitka. In fact, Holocaust survivors became the founding fathers of the District and they feature prominently in its myth of origin. Because of the counter-factual Alaskan Settlement Act and the creation of the Federal District of Sitka, those Jews of Europe not yet murdered by the Nazis were able to escape to Alaska. In a period now known as the Polar Bear days, it was these people who built Sitka: "those who were not broken by suffering and horror, but rather somehow resolved. The former partisans, the resisters, Communist gunmen, left-Zionist saboteurs—the rabble, as they were styled in the newspapers of the south—who showed up in Sitka after the war with

58 For pertinent reflections on the novel as socio-political commentary, see Scanlan, "Alternative History After 9/11," 524–525.

their vulcanized souls" (380). Of course, Sitka also offered a home to the traumatized survivors of the ghettos and the camps, like the Verbovers and like Landsman's own father, who arrived in Sitka, "fresh from a tour of the death and DP camps of Europe." At that time, "[h]e was twenty-five, bald, and missing most of his teeth. He was six feet tall and weighed 125 pounds. He smelled funny, talked crazy, and had outlived his entire family" (30). Still, it is primarily the memory of the heroic survivors that lives on. An obscure but nonetheless striking element of their legacy, for instance, is a system of tunnels dug under the downtown area of Sitka. Landsman had always thought that these tunnels belonged to the realm of urban legend, but criminalist Shpringer explains to him that they are real and are aptly called Warsaw tunnels: "[w]hen the greeners got here after the war. The ones who had been in the ghetto at Warsaw. At Bialystok. The ex-partisans. I guess some of them didn't trust the Americans very much. So they dug tunnels. Just in case they had to fight again. That's the real reason it's called the Untershtat" (22).[59]

Also, in a way reminiscent of Englander's *The Ministry of Special Cases*, *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* is peppered with more oblique Holocaust-inflected parallels and allusions. With the impending Reversion of Sitka, its Jewish inhabitants find themselves in a in a familiar situation that runs as an ever-recurring theme throughout Jewish history: after having grown comfortable in their make-shift haven, they are again facing expulsion. "I guess that's how it always goes," as Landsman realizes. "Egypt. Spain. Germany" (380). As in Nazi Germany, those Jews with enough money and the right connections are getting out, fleeing "the District for the short roster of places that will welcome them, or that have tired of hearing about pogroms secondhand and are hoping to throw one for themselves" (19). Someone is even traveling to a place as exotic as Madagascar, which sounds decidedly ironic in light of the much speculated-upon idea of the Nazis to transport the Jews of Europe to that island. Even more ironic is the popular Sitka song "Nokh Amol" ("Once Again"), which celebrates the hope supposedly present in the purportedly fresh sea breeze coming in from the ocean. As it happens, the Sitka wind rather "carries a sour tang of pulped lumber, the smell of boat diesel and the slaughter and canning of salmon … 'Nokh Amol' dates from the Polar Bear days, … and it's supposed to be an expression of gratitude for another miraculous deliverance: Once Again. Nowadays the Jews of the Sitka District tend to hear the ironic edge that was there all along" (4). But the irony of "Nokh Amol"

59 The word "Untershtat" could be translated both as "downtown" and "under city."

resides not only in the imminent expulsion of the Sitka Jews, but even more poignantly in its similarity to an actual historical slogan: "Never Again," which after genocides in Cambodia, Bosnia, Rwanda, and elsewhere, has come to sound like an empty phrase as well.

One of the key functions of these direct and indirect references to the Holocaust in *The Yiddish Policemen's Union*, I would suggest, is their effect as powerful and emotionally charged "alienating" devices within the larger framework of the novel as alternative history. They are invitations to the readers to stop and think, and to reflect on their own lives and the world in which they live. As Gavriel Rosenfeld notes, "[a]lternate history is inherently presentist. It explores the past less for its own sake than to utilize it instrumentally to comment upon the state of the contemporary world."[60] And so it is in Chabon's novel: the history of the Holocaust is in various ways the fulcrum between Chabon's Jewish Sitka and actual Jewish American life. In both worlds, the memory of the Nazi genocide is central to processes of Jewish identity formation and cultural and historical consciousness, but of course in decidedly different ways. In a way, what simultaneously connects and separates Jewish life in fictional Sitka and in the actual US is the emotionally charged memory of the Holocaust. Beyond the obvious ways, then, in which the novel tells a story about post-9/11 America and its complex relations to religious fundamentalism and terrorism, Chabon's treatment of the Holocaust is instrumental in opening up a space for a critical examination of the meanings of "Jewishness" in contemporary American life. That is to say, it is precisely by imagining a history that hinges upon an alternative outcome of the Holocaust that Chabon presents as themes for contemplation such issues as the nature and function of Holocaust memory in Jewish American life, the legacy of East European Jewish language and culture, and the complex nature of Jewish identity in relation to race, religion, and the broader effects of postmodern American consumer culture on Jewish life.[61] Thus, the novel highlights the historical

60 Gavriel D. Rosenfeld, *The World Hitler Never Made: Alternate History and the Memory of Nazism* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 10.

61 The very characters of Landsman and Berko offer powerful illustrations of some of the issues at stake. The massively proportioned Berko Shemets, born of a Jewish father and Tlingit mother and having grown up among the Tlingit community as "Johnny 'the Jew' Bear" (42), adopted a Jewish life from the age of thirteen. Today, he "is observant, but in his own way and for his own reasons. He is a minotaur, and the world of Jews is his labyrinth" (41). Landsman, by contrast, is the son of a traumatized Holocaust survivor and a self-confident pioneer of Jewish Alaska, but has very little knowledge of or affinity with Jewish matters: "[m]y homeland is in my hat. It's in my ex-wife's tote bag" (368).

contingency of memory, tradition, and identity in contemporary (Jewish) American life, and effectively suggests that all of these matters are essentially open to limitless reconfiguration and re-invention.

Significantly, the novel's suggestion of radical possibilities to freely invent is not just a consequence of what might be termed a postethnic orientation on Jewish American identity. In fact, it is also a product of this postmodern American consumer culture, where the (dialectical) relationship between market forces and the tastes of individual consumers ultimately trump the precepts and imperatives of tradition. That is to say, as a work of contemporary Jewish American literature and culture, Chabon's novel is *at the same time* very much part and parcel of the larger dominant cultural system of consumerism (as are indeed the other works of fiction discussed in this study). It is often feared that such a form of culture effectively curtails any form of contemplation. Yet I would suggest that American consumerism does neither so much restrict nor encourage (critical) thinking; instead, it merely sets the terms on which such thought is possible. In fact, Chabon's full embrace of the genres and tropes of popular culture demonstrates that these terms are eminently flexible and capacious. Thus, in *The Yiddish Policemen's Union*, it is through the profoundly American genre of hardboiled detective fiction that Chabon is able to engage with relatively distant Jewish histories—that of the Holocaust, that of Yiddish and Yiddishkeit—that are not his own and that would otherwise be unavailable to him. The point here is that even though Chabon may not speak Yiddish or even the same (literary) language as a Bellow, Malamud, or Roth, he does speak the language of American popular and mass culture. In fact, it is precisely genre fiction—Chabon's *mamaloshen*—that offers him the means to engage with Jewish tradition and history in his own ways, no matter to what extent the forces of consumerism and commerce are at play there as well. In this respect, Chabon's distinct focus on the Holocaust in particular cannot be seen separately from the wider dynamics of American culture. In fact, it is as a result of a thorough process of Americanization, which has made the Holocaust an established part of *American* cultural consciousness, that this history (or rather its alternative outcome) is able to serve as the starting point for a rich exploration of things Jewish: language, culture, heritage, history. In short, then, despite being thoroughly ingrained in American consumer culture, Chabon's novel does not merely exemplify the ways in which "history is bought, packaged and sold"[62]; the critical point is rather that this

62 This is to quote the subtitle of Tim Cole, *Selling the Holocaust: From Auschwitz to Schindler; How History Is Bought, Packaged, and Sold* (New York: Routledge, 1999).

very cultural context allows him to address complex issues, notably that of Jewish identity, in highly liberal and radically imaginative ways.

Much of Chabon's oeuvre can in fact be read as a vindication of the archetypical forms of American popular and consumer culture as in no way inferior to other forms of art. Indeed, for Chabon, the genres of American popular culture do not offer intrinsically limited forms of expression, but rather a range of unsuspected possibilities. In *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*, for example (and as discussed in chapter 3), Chabon celebrates American (popular) culture for the very therapeutic qualities of escapism that it may offer in response to the death and destruction left by the Holocaust. To Joe Kavalier from Prague, drawing comic books about American superheroes is for a long time the only effective way of coping with the fact that he has escaped Nazism while his family remains trapped in its clutches. Additionally, however, Chabon suggests that American popular culture may effectively serve as a medium for the proliferation of *Jewish* culture. Thus, it is intimated that the popular figure of the superhero is to a considerable extent a *Jewish* figure. Joe, for instance, feels that the superhero really is an American manifestation of the Jewish myth of the Golem: as he tells his future employer Mr. Anapol on his first day in New York, "[t]o me, this Superman is ... maybe ... only an American Golem."[63] And fifteen years later, his cousin Sammy has no doubts about it: "they're all Jewish, superheroes. Superman, you don't think he's Jewish? Coming over from the old country, changing his name like that. Clark Kent, only a Jew would pick a name like that for himself" (585).[64] In fact, Chabon goes as far as to suggest that the fusion of American popular culture and Jewish culture may foster a sense of Jewish regeneration in America—again, in spite of the Holocaust. Thus, after the war, drawing comics with an outspokenly Jewish angle is the only way for Joe to regain his sanity and to come to terms with the loss of his family and the destructive results of the Holocaust. To him, "[t]he shaping of a golem," whether it is done in clay or in the frames of comic books, represents "a gesture of hope, offered against hope, in a time of desperation. … It was the voicing of a vain wish, when you got down to it, to escape" (582).

In a sense, *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* is a manifestation of that very same urge, and of a similar dynamic: it uses an American format to tell a story that tries to escape—futilely, of course—from history and the

63 Michael Chabon, *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay* (New York: Picador, 2000), 86. Hereafter cited in the text.

64 Interestingly enough, Sammy changed his own name from Klayman—that is clay man, like the Golem—to Clay.

history of the Holocaust in particular. Yet in that ultimately futile attempt to escape, something else is gained as well: precisely this ahistorical, *imaginative* effort, triggered by the gaping void left by the Holocaust and furnished by the popular genre of detective fiction, forges a connection with the rich Jewish cultural legacy of Yiddishkeit. And as such, it is able to breathe new life and significance into what for the majority of American Jews is largely dead matter. The point here is not that Chabon would be trading in true-to-life simulacra of Eastern European Jewish culture. By contrast, Chabon makes no secret of his distanced relationship to that cultural heritage and that it is in fact early twenty-first century American literature that is his business. Nonetheless, the legacy of Yiddishkeit comes to life precisely because the forms of American popular culture employed by Chabon allow him to engage with and reshape this legacy to his own purposes, making it resonate with more contemporary Jewish, American, and, not least, political meanings. As a result, Chabon's Yiddish American shtetl is a highly contemporized, patently imaginary location, rather than a place shaped by historical imperatives demanding faithfulness and authenticity. Yet it is precisely in the freedom that Chabon allows himself in imagining a Holocaust-inflected Jewish world that *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* speaks to the contemporary Jewish American experience, making it a distinctly postethnic Jewish American novel.

A remarkable and positive sense of hopefulness seems to underlie such efforts to imaginatively reconstruct or reinvest in Jewish history and culture. Moreover, this sense of hopefulness is not accidental, but seems to actually form a powerful undercurrent in these novels of Chabon as well as in the works by other authors discussed in this study. Indeed, a similarly imaginative and (re)constructive way of exploring Jewishness in relation to the memory of the Holocaust is what characterizes Jonathan Safran Foer's *Everything Is Illuminated* and Nicole Krauss's *The History of Love* as well. Thus, in Foer's novel it is precisely the utter destruction caused by the Holocaust that inspires Jonathan's creation of a fully imaginary, fictional history of Trachimbrod. And in Krauss's *The History of Love*, Alma commences a project of self-discovery and self-fashioning by reconstructing the Holocaust-inflected origins of an obscure novel. Though less clearly postethnic, Nathan Englander's *The Ministry of Special Cases* nonetheless makes uses of a significantly Holocaust-centered narrative framework in order to fictionally explore issues of Jewish identity and totalitarian oppression in a story set in Argentina during the time of the Dirty War. In these various ways, all of these novels bear witness to the central, increasingly explicit and sophisticated significance of the Holocaust in the

contemporary Jewish American imagination. Moreover, in all of the novels discussed here, the primary concern of the engagement with the Holocaust is not to give literary shape to a traumatized Jewish American consciousness or identity. Rather, the Holocaust assumes a central and Americanized point of orientation in much more expansive fictional explorations of Jewish identity, history, and culture. Moreover, the novels—especially those of Chabon, Foer, and Krauss—use the Holocaust as an important point of departure or central reference point for highly inventive, flexible—in short, postethnic—(re)constructions of Jewishness.

As such, the fictions of Nicole Krauss, Jonathan Safran Foer, Nathan Englander, and Michael Chabon clearly demonstrate that the road traveled has been long indeed since an Adorno or a Wiesel questioned the propriety or very possibility of a literature of the Holocaust. These and other earlier writers and intellectuals paved the ground for the development of highly influential modes of thought that perceived in the Holocaust the ultimate negation of any lingering faith one might still have in the project of Modernity, most powerfully represented by the ideals of the Enlightenment. By contrast, to the present generation of Jewish American authors discussed here, the memory of the Holocaust is a central concern in efforts to explore in fiction the possibilities of "(re)construction," whether of history, ethnic identity, Jewish culture, or of (literary) representation itself. Thus, the ways in which the memory of the Holocaust functions in these writers' fiction seems to imply a sense of (renewed) metaphysical optimism that deviates considerably from some of the central tenets of cultural discourse in the past few decades. In fact, it seems to call for a reconsideration of some of the most elemental aspects of the literary and cultural paradigm in which this literature is written and consumed: postmodernism.

PART III
(POST-)POSTMODERNISM

6

Cultivating the Desert

Pragmatist Reconfigurations of Postmodernism

To many critics and intellectuals, the Holocaust does not only represent the brutal murder of six million Jews, but also the bankruptcy of the project of modernity. After this gruesome history, which took place within the heart of civilization and was made possible by the latest technologies, modernity's promise of progress, and its faith in reason, science, and technology, had come to sound hollow and suspect. In this new context—a post-Holocaust age, but also an atomic age, as well as an era of decolonization—the traditional certainties of Western civilization to many had lost their grounding and legitimacy. And so, the Holocaust can be seen as one of the key events that necessitated a thorough re-thinking of Western culture. These efforts began in the arts, in criticism, and in philosophy, but would gradually spread much more broadly and develop into what is now referred to as postmodernism.[1]

A discourse of "no longer possibles," to use Eric Santner's suggestive phrase, postmodernism thrives on challenging and deconstructing traditional certainties.[2] It questions and subverts such notions as meaning,

1 In situating postmodernism in this post-Holocaust, post-atomic, and postcolonial context, I do not mean to suggest that the postmodern critique of modernity and enlightened rationality came wholly out of the blue or that postmodernism represents a complete rupture with modernity. In fact, a very critical attitude toward the project of modernity and enlightened reason had of course been a defining trademark of Romanticism as well as numerous forms of modernism. Postmodernism continues in this critical tradition, but it also radicalizes it. What is important, however, is that this radicalization can only be explained in relation to the historical context: it is precisely in the wake of Auschwitz, Hiroshima, and the Age of Empire that the established tradition of *Modernitätskritik* finds new and radical impetus and develops in a variety of new directions. These new developments can be meaningfully distinguished from their Romantic and modernist predecessors as "postmodern."

2 Eric Santner, *Stranded Objects: Mourning, Memory, and Film in Postwar*

reference, knowledge, history, art, gender, and identity, and suggests that these concepts do not refer to autonomous (or transcendental) regimes of Absolute Truth or objective knowledge. Instead, they are the products or effects of self-referential language games (Derrida), the outcomes of which are determined less by reason per se than by changing relationships of power (Foucault). Undermining the very foundations of knowledge and authority, postmodernism on the one hand is a highly liberating force that emancipates previously suppressed voices and discourses. Indeed, under the sign of postmodernism, the entrenched binaries of Western thought are destabilized and deconstructed, allowing the free manifestation of (previously) subaltern discourses and the untrammeled proliferation of new forms of knowledge. On the other hand, postmodernism also seems to harbor within it a decidedly relativistic streak: if all foundations are destabilized, and if facts are not truths but "constructs," one form of "knowledge" seems as good as the next. Consequently, we risk ending up in a world where "anything goes," meaning is only signs referring to other signs, and nothing really makes sense anymore. And so, after having broken down the temple of liberal humanism, postmodernism seems to have led us into a desert of free-floating signifiers that at once suggests a liberating sense of unlimited opportunity as well as paralysis, indifference, and (moral) vacuity. Indeed, as a profoundly paradoxical metaphor of the contemporary, the postmodern desert provokes some elemental questions: to what extent is this desert a habitable space? Indeed, is it possible to *live* in such a place?[3]

For the Jewish American authors Michael Chabon, Jonathan Safran Foer, Nicole Krauss, and Nathan Englander, the answers to such ques-

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Germany (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), 8–9.

3 In fact, the desert is not an uncommon trope in postmodern discourse (and discourse about postmodernism). For instance, the desert is a key image in Jean Baudrillard's *America*, where the American desert is celebrated as something of an ultimate postmodern space. Also, Slavoj Žižek, another guru of the postmodern, in the wake of the 9/11 terrorist attacks published an essay that bore as its title the ominous words of Morpheus, a character from the movie *The Matrix*: "welcome to the desert of the real." Slavoj Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real: Five Essays on September 11 and Related Dates* (New York and London: Verso, 2002), 15. Interestingly, and in yet another turn in the postmodern house of mirrors, Morpheus himself appears to be quoting from the opening pages of Baudrillard's *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981). Finally, after briefly discussing various "countertheories" to postmodernism, such as the critical pluralism of Wayne Booth and the various neo-Marxist solutions of Fredric Jameson, Edward Said, or Frank Lentricchia, Ihab Hassan doubts whether "these critics [will] lead us out of the desert." Ihab Hassan, "Making Sense: The Trials of Postmodern Discourse," *New Literary History* 18, no. 2 (Winter 1987): 450, http://www.jstor.org/stable/468739.

tions are deeply ambiguous. On the one hand, it is postmodernism that allows these authors to engage with the Holocaust and with Jewishness in highly Americanized, contemporized, and postethnic ways. On the other, these authors assume remarkably hopeful stances with regard to the possibilities of narrative and representation, regeneration, identity, and, not least, love, which I would suggest are also remarkably "un-postmodern." Indeed, these authors turn to such "traditional" concepts and values not to "deconstruct" them, as might be expected from postmodern writers, but rather to embrace and explore the possibilities of *re*constructing them. Significantly, this apparent ambiguity about the postmodern project on the part of these authors can be related precisely to their interest in the memory of the Holocaust, as I will explore in the next chapter. Closer to the concerns of the present chapter, however, is that these authors do not stand alone in their ambiguous position on postmodernism. Indeed, for some time now, critics have been beginning to identify emerging trends in the arts, criticism, and theory that, often through various ways of "reconstruction," seem to move beyond postmodernism.

Though the scholarship on what appears to be emerging as the successor to postmodernism has gradually been mounting in the course of the twenty-first century, there is little consensus on the topic yet. This is illustrated among other things by the fact that a very wide range of not always very clearly related (and sometimes seemingly antithetical) cultural phenomena are studied as signaling a development beyond postmodernism. Indeed, scholars have identified as representatives of a newly emerging paradigm such multifarious developments as: the work on ethics of the later Derrida, the extremely self-reflexive and complex meta-fiction of an author like David Foster Wallace, the neo-realist and minimalist American fiction of the 1980s, as well as the more recent realist fiction marked by a pronounced social commitment and associated especially with authors like Jonathan Franzen and Dave Eggers. At the same time, however, it may be argued that this list of "post-postmodern" developments is in fact still much too narrow. If it is to be assumed that postmodernism is coming to an end and something else is in the making, one surely must also look beyond philosophy and the (literary) arts and take into account a broader array of developments in a supposedly no longer postmodern culture. Thus, one might perhaps identify such seemingly diverse developments as trauma theory, the writings of Barack Obama, the rise of social media, the Occupy Movement, various "nostalgic" and "retro" movements, as well as a fledgling ecological awareness as representatives of an emerging new paradigm (or paradigms) that can no longer be qualified as "postmodern."

In other words, just about anything in contemporary culture might be interpreted in terms of moving beyond postmodernism. For that reason, it will be useful to reflect on what it means to "move beyond postmodernism" in much more precise and methodical terms, before I turn to address in the next chapter the ways in which the Holocaust-inflected Jewish American fiction central to this study relates to postmodernism and that which succeeds it. That is not to say that I intend here to offer a comprehensive overview of all contemporary "post-postmodern" developments. Rather, I am concerned with questions of how such developments might be understood in a more systematic and theoretical sense. A first, crucial step toward answering such questions is to establish in some depth what is meant by postmodernism in the first place, and second, what it is precisely that attempts to move beyond it are actually trying to move beyond. In fact, from such a historicizing perspective, it appears that what is going on presently is not so much a wholesale replacement of postmodernism by something entirely new, but rather a reconfiguration of its core epistemological categories. And this reconfiguration of postmodernism, I will ultimately argue, is best made sense of from a pragmatist perspective.

What Is Postmodernism? Four Perspectives

As many critics attest, postmodernism is a vast, complex, and notoriously unruly subject matter inherently resistant to attempts of general definition. Precisely in an attempt to do some justice to the very complexity of the concept, I will identify and discuss at some length four more or less distinct positions or perspectives from which postmodernism can usefully and meaningfully be understood: a historical perspective, a synchronic perspective, an epochal perspective, and a functional-epistemological perspective.[4]

Because postmodernism today occurs in a wide range of guises, implying an equally wide range of meanings, a historical perspective that traces

4 Given the complexity and contentiousness of the issues at stake, it should perhaps be emphasized that my intentions with this exploration of various perspectives on postmodernism are relatively modest. All I have in mind is to outline (some of) the salient contours of the postmodern playing field and thereby establish a frame of reference through which the bulk of the chapter's content will assume greater significance. I do *not* intend to offer either a condensed survey of postmodernism in its entirety, or a sustained critical assessment of the relative advantages of one conceptualization of the postmodern over the other. In fact, there already exists a huge and admirable body of literature devoted to just those tasks. Linda Hutcheon's *The Politics of Postmodernism*, 2nd ed. (London and New York: Routledge, 2007) offers some useful suggestions for further reading (182–184).

some of the origins of the term will serve as the most useful way to begin situating postmodernism. In fact, bringing such a historical perspective to the study of postmodernism, critics like Perry Anderson, Hans Bertens, and Andreas Huyssen have located the roots of postmodernism in 1950s America. These critics have pointed out that it was in literary and critical circles of this period that the term postmodernism—still spelled in a variety ways—began to be heard increasingly and to accrue meaning as a concept of some consequence. Thus, the American poet Charles Olson is often credited as being one of the first artists to make use of the term in a frequent and consistent manner in his writings and lectures given at Black Mountain College, North Carolina. As Hans Bertens explains, Olson and his circle of "Black Mountain poets" agitated against modernism and its underlying perspective on human experience, which they considered perversely rationalistic and intellectualized.[5] In literary criticism of the (late) 1950s, moreover, postmodernism was picked up by such figures as C. Wright Mills, Irving Howe, and Harry Levin, for whom the term had mostly negative connotations.[6]

By the sixties and into the early seventies, the "rebellion" against modernism that had been started earlier by the Black Mountain poets and had in various ways been continued by the Beat poets as well as the 1960s countercultural movements was joined by critics like Susan Sontag, Leslie Fiedler and Ihab Hassan. As Andreas Huyssen points out, these critics "vigorously though in very different ways and to a different degree, argued for the postmodern."[7] It was in no small part due to the interventions of these critics that postmodernism became a term to reckon with in the field of American criticism and literature of the 1960s. In fact, it is important to emphasize that from a historical perspective, postmodernism originally arose in the context of a range of essentially anti-modernist innovations in American literature, art, architecture, and popular culture, rather than in the wake of French poststructuralist theory, as is often thought.[8] As Huyssen points out, "[a]gainst the codified high modernism of the preceding decades, the postmodernism of the 1960s tried to revitalize the heritage of the European avantgarde and to give it an

5 Hans Bertens, *The Idea of the Postmodern: A History* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), 20–21. On Olson and the Black Mountain poets, see also Perry Anderson, *The Origins of Postmodernity* (London and New York: Verso, 1998), 7–12.

6 Anderson, *The Origins of Postmodernity*, 12–13.

7 Andreas Huyssen, "Mapping the Postmodern," *New German Critique* 33 (Autumn 1984): 17, doi: 10.2307/488352.

8 Bertens, *The Idea of the Postmodern*, 35.

American form."[9] Postmodernism at this point still refers to a relatively coherent phenomenon that has not yet assumed the characteristics for which postmodernism became known and notorious in later years. And it is precisely for that reason that Huyssen refers to the postmodernism current in the period before the early seventies as "the prehistory of the postmodern" (24).

Huyssen marks the 1970s as a crucial period in the development of postmodernism. It was not only by this time that the term first gained wide currency, but postmodernism also developed in ways that left behind the antagonism against modernism which characterized earlier postmodern movements. Indeed, "the rhetoric of avantgardism has faded fast in the 1970s so that one can speak perhaps only now of a genuinely postmodern and post-avantgarde culture," Huyssen argues (24). Significantly, Huyssen speaks here of a postmodern *culture* of the 1970s, whereas the earlier postmodernism of Olson, Fiedler, and Hassan seemed limited primarily to the fields of literature and criticism rather than constituting something broad enough to merit the term culture. At the same time, this "genuinely postmodern" culture that first developed in 1970s is also more difficult to characterize than the anti-modernist postmodernism of the 1960s. The "cultural scene" of the seventies "seemed more amorphous and scattered than that of the 1960s," Huyssen points out, and in fact "seems to be characterized rather by an ever wider dispersal and dissemination of artistic practices all working out of the ruins of the modernist edifice, raiding it for ideas, plundering its vocabulary and supplementing it with randomly chosen images and motifs from pre-modern and non-modern cultures as well as from contemporary culture" (25). This "proliferation of postmodernism" in the 1970s that Huyssen describes is in fact traced more concretely by Bertens and Anderson. Both these critics emphasize the important role played in propagating the idea and concept of postmodernism by Ihab Hassan, as well as by William Spanos's journal of postmodern literature and culture, *boundary 2*. What is more, they both point out how postmodernism in the mid and late seventies became picked up by various other artistic disciplines, giving rise not only to a wide variety of new and experimental forms of art but also to a rampant growth in postmodern criticisms and theories.[10]

9 Huyssen, "Mapping the Postmodern," 16. Hereafter cited in the text.

10 Anderson's focus is on architecture (Robert Venturi's influential manifesto *Learning from Las Vegas* and the more theoretical work of Charles Jencks) and Continental philosophy (the exchange on postmodernity between Jean-François Lyotard and Jürgen Habermas). Bertens' discussion of postmodernism in the 1970s is in fact

A further extremely important development that took place in the 1970s was that postmodernism became increasingly associated with the poststructuralist theories of (mostly, French) thinkers such as Jacques Derrida, Roland Barthes, and, somewhat later, Michel Foucault. In fact, around this time, "a consensus [emerged] in the U.S. that if postmodernism represents the contemporary 'avantgarde' in the arts, poststructuralism must be its equivalent in 'critical theory,'" as Andreas Huyssen notes.[11] Poststructuralist theory, especially as spearheaded by Derrida, radically undermines traditional ideas about the nature of language, suggesting that it does not mirror but constitute reality, and that words and signs do not represent, but refer only to other words and signs. And it is such ideas about language that lie at the root of Derridean deconstruction, a famed critical practice that essentially turns texts against themselves. That is to say, deconstruction attempts to lay bare a text's inner contradictions in order to show how meanings are contingent textual or linguistic constructions, rather than objective truths out there somewhere, to be "dis-covered" by the tenacious scholar.[12] Finding fertile ground in America, initially at Yale University, but later a in the much broader critical, cultural, and artistic context, French poststructuralism thus introduced a conceptual and theoretical framework into the postmodern "force field," as Fredric Jameson likes to call it, that was profoundly centered on language and text.

There has been a notable tendency among critics to consider postmodernism and poststructuralism as practically interchangeable terms. In Robert Eaglestone's 2004 study *The Holocaust and the Postmodern*, for instance, postmodernism is literally "understood as poststructuralism, a still developing tradition of post-phenomenological philosophy."[13] Also, many introductions to postmodernism and anthologies of postmodern theory overwhelmingly and often exclusively focus on work by French

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much more exhaustive. He covers the same ground as Anderson in more detail, but also goes through some of the finer theoretical points of the various postmodern criticisms that sprouted in the mid-seventies before the arrival of poststructuralist theories from France began to radically affect the debate.

11 Huyssen, "Mapping the Postmodern," 36.

12 Or, as Jonathan Culler notes, "to deconstruct a discourse is to show how it undermines the philosophy it asserts, or the hierarchical oppositions on which it relies, by identifying in the text the rhetorical operations that produce the supposed ground of argument, the key concept or premise." Jonathan Culler, *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism* (London, Melbourne, and Henley: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1983), 86.

13 Robert Eaglestone, *The Holocaust and the Postmodern* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 2.

poststructuralist thinkers (rather than on that of, say, Leslie Fiedler, Ihab Hassan, or Charles Jencks)—to the effect that the origins of postmodernism as an American anti-modernist aesthetics and criticism are virtually eclipsed.[14] This is only one of the reasons why scholars like Bertens and Huyssen who approach postmodernism from a historical perspective strongly argue in favor of carefully discriminating between postmodernism and poststructuralism.[15] Another reason is that poststructuralism and postmodernism really have quite different agendas. In whatever way postmodernism is actually defined, it is intrinsically concerned with the aesthetics, art, culture, or philosophy that comes *after* modernism. Poststructuralism, however, as Huyssen has authoritatively demonstrated, is much more concerned with modernism than it is with *post*modernism. From Derrida to Lacan to Althusser, it is the classical authors of modernism that draw these critics' attention, not Thomas Pynchon or John Barth.[16] Moreover, Huyssen points out that in its "obsession" with language and textuality, poststructuralism has favored a kind of aestheticism which is strikingly "imbedded in that very modernist tradition which, at least in American eyes, it presumably transcends."[17] And therefore, Huyssen suggests that "rather than offering a *theory of postmodernity* and developing an analysis of contemporary culture, French theory provides us primarily with an *archeology of modernity*, a theory of modernism at the stage of its exhaustion" (39, italics in original).[18]

14 The overwhelming majority of essays anthologized in Michael Drolet, ed., *The Postmodernism Reader: Foundational Texts* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004) are by French poststructuralist thinkers. Steven Best and Douglas Kellner write in their well-known introduction to postmodern theory that "the most significant developments of postmodern theory have taken place in France and it is upon French postmodern theory that we shall largely focus in this book." Steven Best and Douglas Kellner, *Postmodern Theory: Critical Interrogations* (Basingstoke and London: Macmillan, 1991), 16.

15 Bertens, *The Idea of the Postmodern*, 16–17, 35; Huyssen, "Mapping the Postmodern," 36–47.

16 Of course, one explanation of this is that the poststructuralists saw much of their (deconstructivist) ideas prefigured in many of the works of modernism, which themselves offered so many critiques of rational modernity. See also note 1 of this chapter.

17 Huyssen, "Mapping the Postmodern," 40. Hereafter cited in the text.

18 Of course, much more might be said about the supposed (non-)identity of poststructuralism and postmodernism in general, and of Huyssen's argument that poststructuralism offers an archeology of modernity in particular. For a pertinent critical reading of Huyssen's argument, see Josh Toth, *The Passing of Postmodernism: A Spectroanalysis of the Contemporary* (Albany: State University Press of New York, 2010), 38–45.

The common tendency to conflate poststructuralism and postmodernism is a significant indicator of the impact poststructuralism has had on postmodernism in its various guises. However, the conflation does not so much bear witness to a fruitful, cross-fertilizing dialogue between American postmodern discourse (as a mostly artistic, aesthetic, and critical discourse), and (French) poststructuralist theory. Except perhaps in postmodern literature, there is in fact little evidence to suggest such immediate encounters between postmodernism and poststructuralism. It seems, rather, that poststructuralism's impact on postmodernism is felt mostly in the ways it has facilitated a *critical* understanding of a host of developments taking place in contemporary arts, popular culture, as well as society, and which have come to be termed postmodern. Indeed, from the late 1970s onward, Derrida, Barthes, Foucault, Lacan, De Man, Lyotard, Baudrillard, Althusser, Macherey and many other poststructuralist critics and theorists became household names in virtually all of the humanities and many of the social sciences. And even if these poststructuralist thinkers themselves, with the exception of Lyotard, have rarely commented upon postmodernism, it is through the implementation of their critical vocabulary by, mostly, American scholars that a broad awareness of the significance of postmodernism emerged. An awareness, moreover, that conceived of postmodernism in highly diverse and often conflicting ways, well exceeding the boundaries of its original habitat of literature and aesthetics.

The attraction of a historical perspective on postmodernism is that it emphasizes the development of the concept from a relatively obscure discourse of avantgarde aesthetics in the 1950s to a highly eclectic, widely proliferated and well-established cultural constellation by the 1980s. However, understanding this more recent, seemingly all-encompassing incarnation of postmodernism requires a different critical perspective. At this point, therefore, it is useful to shift from a historical, diachronic perspective to a *synchronic* perspective on postmodern; that is to say, to replace the temporal view with a spatial or crosscut view on postmodernism at the moment when it has established itself as an influential, if not hegemonic cultural force. Here, too, it is not my intention to offer a detailed map of the postmodern playing field but to outline schematically the most significant sub-fields it now comprises and to indicate the sheer range of cultural and intellectual significations potentially implicated by the concept of postmodernism at this point.

To speak of postmodernism in the singular has since the 1970s and certainly since the 1980s become quite misleading; in fact, it makes more sense to speak of postmodernisms in the plural, because the term "means and has

meant different things to different people at different conceptual levels," as Bertens points out.[19] As a way of making sense of the many postmodernisms that circulate, I would suggest that it is useful to distinguish between at least the following five categories of postmodernism.

1. Postmodern art and popular culture
2. Postmodern theory
3. Postmodern criticism
4. Postmodernism as a popular coverall term
5. Postmodernism as a cultural constellation or distinct historical period (postmodernity)

The first category of postmodern art and popular culture is relatively uncomplicated. It refers to postmodernism in as far as it may be located in the realms of literature, architecture, dance, theatre, film, music, and television. The second category, postmodern theory, refers to the scholarly discourse that developed the conceptual framework for understanding postmodern artistic and cultural expressions, represented in America by thinkers like Hassan, Jencks, and Jameson. However, it also comprises an extremely eclectic body of scholarly work operating across the boundaries of philosophy, linguistics, aesthetics, sociology, psychoanalysis, as well as various forms of ideology critique (including some emancipatory and activist discourses). In fact, this is a body of work which is often simply called "theory." This kind of writing is primarily associated with the French poststructuralists, but it certainly also comprises such authors as Richard Rorty, Judith Butler, Slavoj Žižek, as well as perhaps Gayatri Spivak, and Homi K. Bhabha, all of whom have engaged in more than superficial ways with poststructuralist theory, but would nonetheless not fall under that denominator themselves. To Fredric Jameson, it is precisely the hybrid nature of these authors' theoretical writing that marks it as postmodern.[20] I feel that is a valid argument, but it should not lead us to lose sight of the fact that these theorists work in many different scholarly disciplines and intellectual traditions, from post-structuralism, to post-Marxism, postcolonialism, neo-pragmatism, and feminism. Consequently, it is important to note that to label the work of these authors as "postmodern theory" is to make

19 Bertens, *The Idea of the Postmodern*, 10. Indeed, Bertens quite consistently speaks of postmodernisms in this volume.

20 Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism and Consumer Society," in *Postmodernism and Its Discontents: Theories, Practices*, ed. Ann E. Kaplan (London and New York: Verso, 1993), 14–15.

use of a somewhat willful, heuristic construction that in most cases is not championed by this body of writing itself.

It is also for that reason that I suggest that in addition to the category of postmodern theory, it is useful to distinguish, thirdly, a category of postmodern criticism. By this, to put it somewhat unkindly, I mean postmodern theory's epigones, or that enormous contingent of scholars who have analyzed postmodern art and popular culture and who have mined and expanded upon the complex body of writing now referred to as postmodern theory. It is this field of discourse which bears prime responsibility for spreading and institutionalizing postmodernism as the central paradigm of the contemporary, originally in the US but by now across the Western world.

From this influential scholarly discourse on postmodernism flows a fourth category of postmodernism, which comprises the use of postmodernism as a popular coverall term. That is to say, the term postmodernism is often employed, in critical discourse but also in more popular media, as an (often dismissive) shorthand covering a host of more or less related phenomena in culture, arts, scholarship, politics, and society. More vaguely even, the term is also often used to refer to a certain "spirit of the age," to a certain attitude or lifestyle supposedly present among contemporary generations, and to other highly unspecified and generic contemporary phenomena. This use of the term postmodernism might be compared to the way words like Medieval or Romantic function in everyday language. The point here is not so much to criticize this popular use of the term postmodernism. Even if it usually turns postmodernism into a caricature or an empty catchphrase, it powerfully indicates how postmodernism has developed from an obscure, avant-garde term into a household name.

Finally, postmodernism can be seen as an entire cultural constellation or distinct historical period, in which case the term preferred tends to be postmodernity. In fact, this fifth category introduces a new perspective on postmodernism in addition to the historical and synchronic perspective I have explored so far, namely an epochal one. After the great proliferation of postmodernism into nearly all dimensions of cultural practice in the previous decades, it was perhaps not surprising that in the course of the 1980s, postmodernism began to feature in comprehensive theories of the contemporary.[21] A central text in this respect is Jean-François Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (published in France in 1979). Famously defining postmodernism "as incredulity toward metanarratives," Lyotard suggests that postmodernism represents a condition,

21 Bertens, *The Idea of the Postmodern*, 111.

or indeed a period, in which the old metanarratives or grand narratives, that is, the supposedly universal and everlasting truths that supported modern Western civilization, have lost their legitimacy.[22] Instead of grand narratives, the postmodern condition can only consist of a multitude of contingent "language games" and *petit reçits* (small narratives). As Perry Anderson points out, Lyotard's book was the first instance of a philosopher engaging with the concept of postmodernism. Its fame and significance inhere in the fact that it was also the first attempt to stretch the significance of the concept beyond art and art criticism toward considering "postmodernity as a general change in human circumstance. The vantage-point of the philosopher assured it a wider echo, across audiences, than any previous intervention."[23] But other scholars besides Lyotard also explored the idea that postmodernity represented a fundamental shift in the very make-up of the human condition. As Bertens discusses at length, seminal or otherwise important contributions in this field have been made, amongst others, by Jürgen Habermas, Jean Baudrillard, Richard Rorty, David Harvey, and Zygmunt Bauman. Yet arguably the most notable in this respect is the work of Fredric Jameson.

Already in the early article "Postmodernism and Consumer Society," Jameson suggests that postmodernism is "a periodizing concept whose function is to correlate the emergence of new formal features in culture with the emergence of a new type of social life and a new economic order." That is to say, "postmodernism is closely related to the emergence of this new moment of late, consumer or multinational capitalism."[24] And it is with that reference that Jameson signals what will turn into the essence of his later thinking, which is forcefully summarized by the very title of his magnum opus of 1984: *Postmodernism, or The Logic of Late Capitalism*. In this work, Jameson again repeatedly emphasizes that he is not concerned with offering a stylistic analysis of postmodernism, but rather a historical one. For him, such a historical approach is all the more important (and challenging) because he sees postmodernism as "a moment in which the very conception of historical periodization has come to seem most problematical indeed."[25] Though Jameson acknowledges that his analysis, as part of the very moment of postmodernism itself, can never wholly transcend or escape its logic, he

22 Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), xxiv.

23 Anderson, *The Origins of Postmodernity*, 26.

24 Jameson, "Postmodernism and Consumer Society," 15, 28.

25 Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or The Logic of Late Capitalism* (London and New York: Verso, 1991), 3. Hereafter cited in the text.

nonetheless aims to resist what he sees as postmodernism's ahistorical and fragmenting tendencies. Indeed, from an outspokenly neo-Marxist point of view, Jameson's approach is intended as "a genuinely dialectical attempt to think our present of time in History" (46). In other words, the kind of historical-materialist approach to postmodernism that Jameson favors distinguishes itself by always taking into account what is likely to be missed by purely stylistic analyses: "namely, that this whole global, yet American, postmodern culture is the internal and superstructural expression of a whole new wave of American military and economic domination throughout the world; in this sense, as throughout class history, the underside of culture is blood, torture, death, and terror" (5). Clearly, what is at stake for Jameson is not only to historicize postmodernism as a distinct epoch or phase in what might be called a larger historical dialectic, but also to situate it in an outspokenly political context and to submit it to a (mostly negative) political critique. Incidentally, it is this historicizing and emphatically political (and very critical) approach that characterizes on the whole the neo-Marxist stance on postmodernism and postmodernity. Still, the significance of this neo-Marxist scholarship lies not so much in its (sometimes outright) dismissals of postmodernism, but in its "against the grain" interrogations of the phenomenon: its critical analyses of what happens when culture appears—from the neo-Marxist perspective, in any case—to do away with history.

What is interesting about an *epochal* perspective on postmodernism, like Jameson's for instance, is that it may offer a compelling and unifying framework for understanding a host of seemingly unrelated cultural phenomena, practices, and discourses. Thus, it would establish a sense of order and overarching logic to the wide proliferation of postmodernisms that earlier I tried to capture under the denominator of the diachronic perspective. Indeed, this is precisely what Jameson's understanding of postmodernism intends to do. His particular epochal perspective suggests that postmodern art, theory, criticism, as well as popular understandings of postmodernism are all part of a distinct culture, historical period, or condition that has its own coherent inner logic: the logic of late capitalism. Yet there is something inherently totalizing and therefore unpostmodern about such a perspective: regardless of the idiosyncrasies of the various postmodernisms and the possible contradictions between them, the epochal perspective attempts to fit all of these postmodernisms into a single "bigger picture," or a new grand narrative.[26]

26 Lyotard, for instance, has often been criticized for this, because if it is assumed that incredulity toward metanarratives is what defines postmodernism, that incredulity becomes itself a new metanarrative. Toth, *The Passing of Postmodernism*, 28.

However, there is still another way of making sense of postmodernism in all of its guises that steers clear of the totalizing tendency of the epochal perspective. This fourth and final perspective tries to take postmodern into account in a comprehensive, generalized manner by considering it as a distinct though contingent "epistemological configuration" from which a variety of postmodern practices flow.[27] Such a perspective is essentially *heuristic* in nature and does not intend to come to a definitive pronouncement on what postmodernism *is* in an ontological sense. Rather, its sole purpose is to offer emphatically generalized and provisional characterizations of postmodernism—*petit reçits*, as Lyotard might say—that are useful to a greater or lesser extent in explaining how postmodernism in its various guises tends to *work*. For that reason, I will term this a functional-epistemological perspective on postmodernism.

A functional-epistemological perspective on postmodernism might be seen as the learned cousin of the popular practice that refers to postmodernism as a coverall term, briefly discussed above. After all, this perspective, too, is concerned with condensing a vast and complex phenomenon into manageable proportions. A radical difference, however, exists in the fact that a functional-epistemological perspective does not seek to obscure postmodernism's complexity with a single-word shorthand, but rather to acknowledge it and, to some extent, make sense of it by offering characterizations or explanations of postmodernism which emphasize their own make-shift, heuristic nature. Thus, after emphasizing the enormous proliferation and confusion by now associated with postmodernism, Hans Bertens suggests that "[i]f there is a common denominator to all these postmodernisms, it is that of a crisis in representation: a deeply felt loss of faith in our ability to represent the real, in the widest sense. No matter whether they are aesthetic, epistemological, moral, or political in nature, the representations that we used to rely on can no longer be taken for granted."[28] Using a refreshingly everyday image, Linda Hutcheon offers a functional-epistemological description of postmodernism that makes a rather similar point:

27 I am borrowing the idea of postmodernism as a distinct "epistemological configuration" from Toth, *The Passing of Postmodernism*, 5.

28 Bertens, *The Idea of the Postmodern*, 11. Such a perspective may seem very close to Lyotard's characterization of the postmodern as incredulity toward metanarratives, yet there is a subtle pragmatic difference. As many critics point out, Lyotard's take on the postmodern is ultimately self-defeating, because principled incredulity toward metanarratives would seem to question everything but itself. Ironically, then, incredulity toward metanarratives itself turns out to be a New Belief. The loss of faith that Bertens describes, however, is much more open-ended; he simply observes a practical, less than a principled, inability to rely on existing representations.

> [i]n general terms [postmodernism] takes the form of self-conscious, self-contradictory, self-undermining statement. It is rather like saying something whilst at the same time putting inverted commas around what is being said. The effect is to highlight, or 'highlight,' and to subvert, or 'subvert,' and the mode is therefore a 'knowing' and an ironic—or even 'ironic'—one.[29]

It is important to emphasize that the functional-epistemological descriptions of postmodernism offered by Bertens or Hutcheon are not intended to apply immediately to individual works of postmodern artists or theorists. Instead, their descriptions seek to understand in general terms what unites the various postmodernisms (Bertens), and more broadly, what postmodernism has come to stand for in contemporary culture (Hutcheon). Thus, Bertens and Hutcheon strikingly highlight that postmodernism is the sum of its individual parts, and that it at the same time also exceeds it, representing, indeed, a period or epoch, a lifestyle, an attitude, an epistemological orientation. Or as Ihab Hassan suggests, "[m]ore than an artistic style or historical trend, more than a personal sensibility or zeitgeist, postmodernism is a hermeneutic device, a habit of interpretation, a way of reading all our signs under the mandate of misprision. I simply mean that we now see the world through postmodern-tinted glasses."[30]

As will become clear in the remainder of this chapter, to consider postmodernism as a distinct epistemological configuration is particularly useful in thinking about contemporary developments in the arts and in cultural theory that seem to point beyond postmodernism. As Josh Toth suggests, such developments might be conceived of as "epistemological *re*configurations," rather than "complete epistemic ruptures" or "epochal breaks."[31] Thus, it is possible to "avoid the rather simplistic alternatives": that postmodernism and that which succeeds it are "(1) artificially categorized moments in a much larger and inevitable trajectory, or (2) synchronic and utterly exclusive epistemes. Viewed as a series of nonprogresssive *re*configurations … periodizations can be more easily understood as both continuous and discontinuous with their predecessors."[32] Yet before concentrating on these *re*configurations, it is necessary to determine why the old configurations no longer suffice in the first place.

29 Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism*, 1.

30 Ihab Hassan, "Beyond Postmodernism: Toward an Aesthetic of Trust," in *Beyond Postmodernism: Reassessments in Literature, Theory, and Culture*, ed. Klaus Stierstorfer (Berlin and New York: De Gruyter, 2003), 201.

31 Toth, *The Passing of Postmodernism*, 5. Emphasis mine.

32 Ibid., 17.

What Is Wrong with Postmodernism?

Of course, postmodernism has been a highly contentious phenomenon from the day of its very inception. For decades, critics like Terry Eagleton, Christopher Norris, and Daniel Bell have strongly criticized it and have refused to accept what they saw as postmodernism's central tenets and key characteristics. There have even been critics who have never been willing to acknowledge the existence of a phenomenon like postmodernism in the first place.[33] Nevertheless, these various critics had in common that they opposed postmodernism from perspectives external to it (for example from neo-Marxist or neo-conservative positions). In recent years, however, a strand of scholarship *within* postmodern thought has been developing that is concerned about the possibility that after decades of destabilization, decentering, and deconstruction, postmodernism may have reached an epistemological and ethical impasse. This emerging strand of scholarship is deeply rooted in various traditions of postmodern and poststructuralist thought and practice, which, moreover, it is unwilling to abandon. Nonetheless, it searches for ways of reaching beyond this postmodern impasse, tentatively exploring the possibilities of *re*construction. What is important to note here is that these critics generally have a quarrel with a largely unspecified postmodernism, rather than with individual postmodern artists or theorists. Though they may criticize, for instance, the "debilitating ironies" of postmodern literature or the "irresponsible relativism" of postmodern theory, they do on the whole accept the importance and lasting significance of the Pynchons and Derridas of this world. In a sense, there is no surprise in this: well-informed critics of postmodernism would be hard pressed to find a postmodernist who truly embraces the kind of self-destructive nihilism postmodernism is often accused of by its opponents. Instead, sympathetic to postmodernism in principle, these scholars direct their criticism at a certain generalized *idea* of postmodernism and what it has come to stand for in contemporary culture, indeed, at postmodernism as a distinct epistemological configuration. Therefore, as Nicoline Timmer observes, it is necessary "to distinguish between the original gist (and function) of postmodern and poststructural theories and what has *become* of these ideas."[34] And so, my

33 Klaus Stierstorfer, "Introduction: Beyond Postmodernism—Contingent Referentiality?" in Stierstorfer, *Beyond Postmodernism*, 3; Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 59.

34 Nicoline Timmer, *Do You Feel It Too? The Post-Postmodern Syndrome in American Fiction at the Turn of the Millennium* (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2010), 21.

discussion of what is wrong with postmodernism is really a discussion of what has become of postmodernism.

Though the attempt to think "beyond postmodernism" is of relatively recent vintage, potential problems inherent to postmodernism had already been identified at the time when postmodernism was still in its heyday and by scholars sympathetic to the phenomenon. Andreas Huyssen, for instance, already warned against "that easy postmodernism of the 'anything goes' variety" in his article "Mapping the Postmodern" of 1984.[35] And for his part, Hans Bertens reflects upon what seems to be a destructive sense of relativism inherent to postmodernism: "[w]hat postmodernity discovers … is that rationality cannot ground itself, and that therefore modernity cannot be grounded. As a result, the idea of modern knowledge turns out to be a self-defeating proposition," and the reflexivity that lies at the heart of the (post)modern project is "always the starting-point of an infinite regression."[36] It is Ihab Hassan, however, one of postmodernism's first and foremost theorists, who is also one of the first and most vocal contributors to the efforts aimed at criticizing postmodernism "from within." In the introduction to *The Postmodern Turn* (1987), a collection of his writings on postmodernism, Hassan notes that postmodernism has changed over the years and has taken, as he sees it, "a wrong turn."[37] Though *The Postmodern Turn* can be read as a kind of farewell to postmodernism, in the years after its publication, Hassan repeatedly returned to the topic in order to criticize what he sees as postmodernism's "wrong turn" and to suggest solutions for mending it. Later on in this chapter, I will address Hassan's offered solutions, but at this point, I want to focus on some of the postmodern problems that he identifies.

Underlying Hassan's entire quarrel with postmodernism since the late 1980s is the concern, which I think is a valid one, that postmodernism would undermine the viability of "meaning" and the ineradicable human need to "make sense" of things. As Hassan points out, "[t]he million and more years of hominid history, the structures of the human brain and urgencies of human desire, decree that we must continually seek to make sense."[38] Postmodernism, however, and Hassan singles out postmodern literary theory in particular, "does not help us to 'make sense' in any

35 Huyssen, "Mapping the Postmodern," 52.

36 Bertens, *The Idea of the Postmodern*, 241.

37 Ihab Hassan, *The Postmodern Turn: Essays in Postmodern Theory and Culture* (Columbus: Ohio University Press, 1987), xvii.

38 Ihab Hassan, "Making Sense," 440.

traditional way. Rather, it destabilizes, moots, provokes."[39] Of course, postmodern provocation and destabilization of meaning have an important critical function, which Hassan does not deny.[40] His concern, rather, is that there comes a point when the destabilization or deconstruction of meaning becomes an end in itself. At that point, postmodernism loses its critical potential and turns into, at best, a vapid pastime of the elite, and at worst, a relativistic, corrosive element in society. From Hassan's perspective, that point has in fact been reached by the late twentieth century when "cultural postmodernism" had evolved into a global phenomenon, that of "postmodernity."[41] In his critical pieces on postmodernism of that period, Hassan's disillusionment with postmodernism is expressed in a number of unequivocal and oft-recurring terms. Thus, what Hassan considers as postmodernism's "wrong turn" consists of the following: "[c]aught between ideological truculence and demystifying nugacity, caught in its own kitsch, postmodernism has become a kind of eclectic raillery, the refined prurience of our borrowed pleasures and trivial disbeliefs."[42] In a similar vein, he characterizes contemporary postmodernism in the final chapter of *The Postmodern Turn* as "a cultural field of brilliant dreck and jocose rubble," troubled by "indeterminacies" and "ghostly immanences." Postmodernism has led to a certain "sterility" in which "we all risk … to become barren."[43] At another occasion, Hassan suggests that "postmodernism consumes itself in doubts and ironies, ashes and aporias," and by 2001, he asserts that "cultural postmodernism … has … metastasized into sterile, campy, kitschy, jokey, dead-end games or sheer media stunts."[44]

There is something about this litany of complaints about postmodernism that sounds somewhat shrill and insistent. Perhaps this is part of the

39 Ihab Hassan, "Beyond Postmodernism? Theory, Sense, and Pragmatism," in *Making Sense: The Role of the Reader in Contemporary American Fiction*, ed. Gerhard Hoffmann (Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1989), 317.

40 Indeed, Hassan acknowledges that "we must remain [grateful] to the masters of demystification." Ihab Hassan, *The Postmodern Turn*, 229.

41 Ihab Hassan, "From Postmodernism to Postmodernity: The Local/Global Context," *Philosophy and Literature* 25, no. 1 (April 2001): 3–5, doi: 10.1353/phl.2001.0011; Ihab Hassan, "Beyond Postmodernism: Toward an Aesthetic of Trust," 203–204.

42 Ihab Hassan, *The Postmodern Turn*, xvii.

43 Ibid., 214, 229; 229–230.

44 Ihab Hassan, "Let the Fresh Air In: Critical Perspectives on the Humanities," in *The End of Postmodernism: New Directions; Proceedings of the First Stuttgart Seminar in Cultural Studies, 04.08–18.08.1991*, ed. Heide Ziegler (Stuttgart: M&P Verlag für Wissenshaft und Forschung, 1993), 135; Ihab Hassan, "From Postmodernism to Postmodernity," 5.

reason why Hassan's call for a revision of postmodernism remained largely unheard till around the turn of the century. By that time, however, highly critical points about postmodernism were increasingly being made by other, often relatively young critics *themselves* associated with postmodernism. Interestingly, their complaints resemble Hassan's earlier grievances to a considerable extent. For instance, Josh Toth mentions "the increasingly nihilistic (or, we might say, suicidal) trajectory of postmodern metafiction," "the implicit and *perverse* ethics of postmodernism," and, more generally, "its ultimately unsustainable strategies." Nicoline Timmer speaks of "postmodern clichés" and of a distinctly postmodern perspective on subjectivity which offers "a debilitating way of framing what it means to be human." Linda Hutcheon suggests that "[i]f postmodernism is not morally bankrupt, it is certainly severely ethically limited." And finally, Jennifer Geddes notes that postmodernism, sometimes and in some forms, has been "too entranced with its own rhetoric, too entertained by its own cleverness, too absorbed in its own fascinations."[45] In summary, the problem with postmodernism, or rather, the *perceived* problem with postmodernism, around the turn of the century boils down to the following complaint: by uncritically celebrating a boundless proliferation of signs without referents (or "free-floating signifiers") that would allow a liberating "free play," postmodernism has thwarted the human need to "make sense" of the world. In this attack on the very possibility of meaning, moreover, postmodernism has manifested a glaring lack of responsibility and ethical sense.[46]

Of course, the attack on postmodernism for being an irresponsible, relativistic force stands in sharp contrast with champions of postmodernism who have hailed it as an important and powerful critical force. Key postmodern critics like Andreas Huyssen and Linda Hutcheon have much emphasized and valued the critical potential of postmodernism. Hutcheon, for instance, has suggested that postmodernism's "initial concern is to de-naturalize some of the dominant features of our way of life; to point out that those entities that we unthinkingly experience as 'natural' … are in

45 Toth, *The Passing of Postmodernism*, 89, 132, 132. Italics in original. Nicoline Timmer, *Do You Feel It Too?*, 15, 13; Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism*, 174; Jennifer Geddes, "Attending to Suffering in/at the Wake of Postmodernism," in *The Mourning After: Attending the Wake of Postmodernism*, ed. Neil Brooks and Josh Toth (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2007), 75.

46 Of course, it might be argued that there always remains the distinct possibility that it is fundamentally impossible to make (real) sense of the world. But the possibility is purely theoretical and has no practical repercussions: after all, the only way to find out is by *continuing* to try and make sense. In other words, should it turn out that it is impossible to make sense, we will *of necessity* never know.

fact 'cultural.'"[47] I would suggest, however, that the forces of postmodern critique and postmodern "relativism" do not so much oppose each other, but represent two sides of the same coin. Moreover, whether postmodernism is valued positively as a critical force or negatively as a relativistic one depends to a large extent on the institutional context in which postmodernism operates. As discussed in the previous section, postmodernism in its early years was directed at undermining the dominance of high modernism and liberal humanism, along with its elitist and utopian assumptions. But by the end of the twentieth century, it became apparent that postmodernism had itself turned into the cultural dominant or norm: everywhere from academia and the arts to multiculturalism and popular culture, postmodernism was no longer a marginal or subversive force but had become a well-established and institutionalized presence. However, at the moment when the postmodern critique of a dominant cultural system becomes itself dominant, the nature of this critical force changes in a fundamental way.

Indeed, several critics point out that postmodernism entered a course of irrevocable decline the moment it turned from an eccentric, oppositional force into a cultural dominant. As is not difficult to imagine, the once subversive gesture of placing imaginary quotation marks around supposedly universal "Truths" may after a while become a predictable or even an annoying habit, itself a cause for critique. And in a sense, something like this happened with postmodernism in recent years. As Josh Toth and Neil Brooks suggest, postmodernism's "increasingly loud movement toward silence and/or the absolute denial of objective truth claims became dogmatic, institutionalized and programmatic."[48] That is to say, postmodern strategies and fascinations which originally had an oppositional and "anarchic" nature—the characteristically postmodern, critical incredulity toward metanarratives—became the New Belief; the "insistence on groundless self-reflexivity (in architecture, literature, or whatever) ironically became *another* ethical and 'elitist' imperative, an imposing suggestion that 'responsible' narratives *do not* allow a ground to persist."[49] But obviously, an essentially anti-hegemonic force loses its credibility at the moment it becomes hegemonic itself. At the moment when that happens, as it arguably did for postmodernism by the late twentieth century, such a force ironically also signs its own death warrant.[50] And so, postmod-

47 Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism*, 2.

48 Josh Toth and Neil Brooks, "Introduction: A Wake and Renewed?" in Brooks and Toth, *The Mourning After*, 7.

49 Toth, *The Passing of Postmodernism*, 22. Italics in original.

50 Brooks and Toth in fact pinpoint a discrete historical event as a marker of post-

ernism's great success, symbolized by its victorious advance through the institutions of knowledge and art, also represents its ultimate failure. As Toth and Brooks suggest, "postmodernism 'failed' because *it continued to speak*, because it continued to make (and privilege) *truth claims* about the impossibility of making such claims. … In short, postmodernism failed *because it didn't die* (as it should have)."[51]

Toward a Pragmatist Reconfiguration of Postmodernism

Even though postmodernism's death knells are being rung ever more loudly, that does not mean that it is possible to leave postmodernism behind and move on as if it never happened. Postmodernism has become a central and intrinsic part of the epistemological configuration through which a large number of people in the West, consciously or not view and understand the world, and as such it is not so easily effaced. Its aesthetic and formal strategies as well as ideological and epistemological concerns have become internalized and part of everyday life and even as they are challenged today, they "continue to live on—as do those of modernism—in our contemporary twenty-first century world," as Linda Hutcheon puts it.[52] A solution to the problems relating to postmodernism is not to be found, then, in a simple and categorical dismissal of postmodernism. To the contrary: as I emphasized above, the scholars (and artists) that in recent years have critiqued postmodernism and looked for ways beyond it are themselves postmodernists. They are committed to and unwilling to relinquish its central teachings about language, representation, history, knowledge, power, etcetera, yet simultaneously they cannot accept the irresponsible relativism these teachings seem to imply. The difficulty of this position is captured nicely by Hans Bertens when he writes that "one does not want to refute the proposition that knowledge is bound up with the knower, is therefore historically and culturally determined, and operates … always in a field of power. One might even … agree with the deconstructionists that knowledge is always under erasure and therefore, properly speaking, never exists. … And yet we seem to know things."[53] Indeed, the central concern of these efforts to move beyond postmodernism seems to be the question of how we can still know things and make sense of things through

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modernism's hegemony: the fall of the Berlin Wall and the subsequent collapse of the Soviet Union. Brooks and Toth, "Introduction: A Wake and Renewed?," 2–3.

51 Toth and Brooks, "Introduction: A Wake and Renewed?," 7. Italics in original.

52 Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism*, 181.

53 Bertens, *The Idea of the Postmodern*, 240.

language and representation, while knowing at the same time the limits, perhaps even the impossibility, of our knowing.[54] The aim of these efforts clearly is not to return to some earlier, supposedly more innocent aesthetic or epistemological constellation before postmodernism. Instead, the challenge is to find means of going forward that retain postmodernism's most valuable legacies but do not fall victim to its more detrimental tendencies. As a result, when artists and scholars now mobilize to critique the faults of postmodernism and to search for ways of assuaging them, they "seem to carry on a certain postmodern project while (all the while) critiquing elements of that project as ineffectual, irresponsible, dangerous, absurd, 'feckless,' etc."[55]

Consequently, as Josh Toth has suggested, it is useful to think of the diverse contemporary attempts to move beyond postmodernism not so much as the harbingers of a radically new, revolutionary paradigm, but rather as efforts that offer a significant "reconfiguration" of the existing paradigm. Such a perspective makes it possible to view periods and movements "as both continuous and discontinuous with their predecessors" and avoids such simplistic solutions as considering them as strictly separate

54 Interestingly, this position is not wholly unprecedented or unique to the contemporary postmodern situation. In fact, many modernist writers at the beginning of the twentieth century experienced an in many ways comparable dilemma. A symptomatic manifestation of this would be Hugo von Hofmannsthal's *The Lord Chandos Letter* (1902), in which the main character Lord Chandos, a sixteenth century English nobleman and poet, writes about his inability to write sensibly any longer as a result of the drastic and dramatic changes of his age. As Erich Heller notes, "[t]his 'Letter' is Hofmannsthal's version of a crisis experienced by many a serious writer of the period [i.e. early twentieth century, JK], and therefore it would be easy to enlarge upon it with numerous quotations from Proust, Valéry, and James Joyce, from Rilke and Musil, and all would sound like mere variations on Hofmannsthal's theme." These modernist authors, Heller continues, "were engaged to different degrees and with different outcomes, in the task of forging a new and complex manner of literary coherence from the very impossibility—as Hofmannsthal put it—of thinking and speaking coherently anymore." Erich Heller, *Thomas Mann: The Ironic German* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 22. Another famous modernist, Thomas Mann, sought to respond to the crisis not so much through experimenting with literary form, but through "the irony of giving a traditional form to the very experience of its disintegration, of clinging to a convention in the clear knowledge of its incongruity, and of desperately resisting despair." Thus, in all of his ostensibly conventional, realistic novels, Mann ironically "set out to build a traditionally solid house on a metaphysically condemned site" (Heller, *Thomas Mann*, 25). As will be seen later in this chapter and the next, a comparably "ironical" stance or approach is embraced by many contemporary thinkers and artists in response to the crisis of *post*modernism.

55 Toth and Brooks, "Introduction: A Wake and Renewed?," 7.

and exclusive units, divided by clear ruptures.[56] Thus, critical and artistic developments beyond postmodernism can be registered by laying note less to revolutionary changes and previously unthinkable innovations, but to gradual though significant changes in direction, made possible by subtle shifts in emphasis.[57]

On the whole, it seems that this gradual change in direction is geared toward smoothening postmodernism's rough edges by placing new (or *renewed*) emphasis on the inevitable need for some form of reference, meaning, and moral agency. In fact, fueled by an urgent sense that failure in this respect would result in wholesale cultural and moral dissolution, contemporary artists and critics are rediscovering and stressing the importance of such deconstructed values as faith, morality, and solidarity. Klaus Stierstorfer for instance notes that "the movement is not so much towards new-found lands of an exotic 'other' but a revisiting of familiar themes, forms, and issues from the past, albeit sometimes presented in new guises." In this process, the tendency is "towards a new anchoring of what is variously characterised as the free-floating signifiers or the irresponsible playfulness of the more 'radical' versions of postmodernism to a system of referents and values, however tentative or contingent."[58] Yet it is precisely this very tentativeness and contingency which Stierstorfer mentions almost casually that ensures that a new "anchoring" of a system of referents and values is truly "beyond" postmodernism rather than a reactionary backward move. After all, an authentic reconfiguration of postmodernism knows that there can be no solid ground on which such notions as meaning, faith, and morality *can* be anchored. But resisting the relativism that seems inherent in such a perspective, it also knows that it cannot give up these intrinsically limited notions and that it is therefore inevitable to continue using them in renewed forms—carefully, tentatively, and ever aware of their contingent nature. It might in fact be suggested that if postmodernism has metaphorically sentenced us to life in the desert, the point is not so much to escape from it or to return whence we came. Rather, the challenge today is to cultivate the desert.

56 Toth, *The Passing of Postmodernism*, 17.

57 Ibid., 78, 95.

58 Stierstorfer, "Introduction: Beyond Postmodernism—Contingent Referentiality?," 3–4, 4. Similarly, Toth and Brooks note that what is called for in the present efforts to move beyond postmodernism is "some type of renewed faith in the possibility of what postmodernism [*sic*] narrative has repeatedly identified as impossible: meaning, truth, representational accuracy, etc." Toth and Brooks, "Introduction: A Wake and Renewed?," 8–9.

Using a somewhat different metaphor, Josh Toth and Neil Brooks suggest that "this period of renewal, of renewalism, is … a period of 'faith without faith,' of 'religion without religion,' of 'mimesis without mimesis.'"[59] Of course, from a theoretical point of view, such a paradoxical position would seem almost self-defeating. Perhaps not surprisingly therefore, Josh Toth a few year later writes that he does not think that it "can ever be fully sustained: even a religion without religion must inevitably be a religion *pure and simple*; if it doesn't have faith in itself as a totalizing discourse (as, in short, a religion), it will not have the motivation to articulate itself as a religion *without religion*."[60] As Toth explains, a renewalist perspective has come to understand that all previous epistemological configurations including postmodernism have been haunted by a certain teleological "specter," which has "inevitably resulted in violently hegemonic claims" (73). Through a reading of Jacques Derrida's *Specters of Marx*, he demonstrates that a renewalist "faith without faith" consequently tries to "respect the specter" by embracing—or "gambling" on—an epistemology and ethics that cannot ultimately be grounded. However, for Derrida, the specter *must* be respected and thus a new imperative is introduced. It is precisely in that instance that Derrida's renewalism undoes itself and the specter reasserts itself, Toth suggests. After all,

> this spectral relationship does not cease to be a problem … simply because we claim to recognize it, to accept it. It is, I am arguing, impossible to respect the specter. This seems to be implicit in the teleological imperative that we *must* respect the specter. After all, if we *must* do it, it's hardly a gamble. Or, … a gamble is hardly a gamble if it is animated by the absolute conviction that to gamble is to *always win*. (73, italics in original)

Toth's point offers a version of the argument that has been raised against Lyotard's definition of postmodernism: like incredulity toward metanarratives, the principled appeal to "respect the specter" will itself turn into a new metanarrative. It is a valid argument, but it also seems to rehearse familiar, deconstructive reflexes, and thereby it misses the point, or at least mislays the emphasis. What appears to me as significant about these attempts to move beyond postmodernism, for which Toth's term "renewalism" strikes me as particularly fitting, is not that it would finally solve the problems of teleological thinking. In fact, the metaphor of the gamble

59 Toth and Brooks, "Introduction: A Wake and Renewed?," 9.

60 Toth, *The Passing of Postmodernism*, 60. Italics in original. Hereafter cited in the text.

seems a more apt description of renewalism than Toth, turning the process into a zero-sum game, is willing to allow. Just as the clever gambler knows that the house always wins in the end, renewalism realizes that even as it attempts to "respect the specter," it cannot ultimately escape from it. But in the meantime, neither "house edge" nor the inevitable return of the specter are reasons not to *play*. Indeed, the point of the renewalist gamble is not a promise of *ultimate* winnings; it is rather that one is willing to accept that one's answers to certain questions are valid or useful only for the moment and that at some indeterminable moment in the future these answers as well the questions themselves may have to be reconsidered. In other words, the gamble Toth speaks of seems motivated by the conviction that currently, after other means have been tried and found wanting, renewalism appears as the most viable or responsible way to play—though the outcome of the game remains ever uncertain.

The problem with Toth's perspective is that it is unable to see how a critique of teleology can itself avoid making teleological truth claims. As he sees it, the renewalist "'religion without religion' must be absolute or final if we are to successfully employ it as a way to avoid the dangers of all other teleological assumptions" (67). But this is to confuse means with ends. When we choose to "believe" in certain values—democratic, Christian, or other—that as postmodernists we know to be ultimately ungrounded, this does not mean that our faith in those values *necessarily* becomes absolute; rather, we choose to believe in them because they serve certain purposes and as such they are useful *as long as they serve our needs*. Having come through postmodernism, we have found out that it is more *useful* to have certain beliefs than to have none. Indeed, our belief is practical, not transcendental, but it is nonetheless a true belief: we are like foot soldiers in the midst of battle, devotedly clutching our guns but knowing all the while this will not protect us against everything. Moreover, even if we would gladly step aboard an armored vehicle, we realize that even its strong shell cannot guarantee us absolute safety. In other words, the renewalist "religion without religion" is truly a paradox, not an oxymoron, as Toth supposes. For that reason, what is needed is an impulse that would enable greater theoretical sensitivity to precisely the paradoxical nature of renewalism. I suggest that such an impulse is offered by pragmatism.

Of course, I am not the first by far to suggest that pragmatism may be useful in attending to some of our most dire postmodern issues. In fact, many neo-pragmatist scholars have found in the work of classical pragmatist thinkers like Charles Sanders Peirce, William James, and John Dewey

solutions to the problems of postmodernism.[61] Significantly, moreover, the attractions of American pragmatism were keenly felt by one of postmodernism's first and foremost theorists: Ihab Hassan. For Hassan, pragmatism, especially as represented by William James, presented a way out of the dead-end he felt postmodernism was heading towards. Pragmatism, he argues, "offers us now genuine possibilities of thought and action. For it cheerfully avoids the extremes of philosophic skepticism and ideological dogmatism. … In a crucial sense, then, pragmatism answers to our postmodern condition; more, it brings so many elements of the human condition itself into active choice."[62] However, as Katrin Amian points out, many of these pragmatic turns are pitched in strong opposition to postmodernism: "[p]ragmatism is set up as a cure for the deficiencies of postmodernism," and as a result, "[t]he dialogue that might have been possible between pragmatism and postmodernism is thus instantly undercut."[63] To be sure, I am not suggesting that pragmatism would offer an *alternative* to postmodernism, or that we all become pragmatists like Rorty, Dewey, James, or Peirce. Also, I am not proposing a fully developed post-postmodern theory rooted in pragmatism. My intentions are, by contrast, more modest, or, if I may, more *pragmatic*. By briefly exploring in very general(ized) terms some central tenets of pragmatist thought, I will demonstrate how pragmatism offers tools to re-think, reformulate, and, ultimately, leave behind, some of the key problems that beset contemporary postmodernism. Again, this is not to replace or supplant the thoroughly established, widespread postmodern epistemological configuration, but to analyze, and at the same time contribute to, its *re*configuration. Indeed, the point is that pragmatism offers ways, precisely, of understanding the many current artistic and critical attempts to move beyond postmodernism—including the Jewish American fiction central to this study.

As many scholars have pointed out, pragmatism and postmodernism share a lot of common ground. Central to both postmodernism and pragmatism is the rejection of a dualist kind of thinking that has held Western thought in thrall ever since Plato and with renewed vehemence since Descartes. That is to say, postmodernists and pragmatists deny the assumption central to much of Western philosophy that there is a split

61 See for instance Larry Hickman, *Pragmatism as Post-Postmodernism: Lessons from John Dewey* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007).

62 Hassan, "Making Sense," 455.

63 Katrin Amian, *Rethinking Postmodernism(s): Charles S. Peirce and the Pragmatist Negotiations of Thomas Pynchon, Toni Morrison, and Jonathan Safran Foer* (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2008), 2.

between the physical world of raw, immediate reality on the one hand, and of mind, reason, and truth on the other—in short, the metaphysical world. Dualist philosophy inherently favored the metaphysical realm over the physical one, seeing perfection in the former and imperfection in the latter. It saw as its task the pursuit of absolute truth, which would finally bring into correspondence the physical realm with the metaphysical one and thus ground our knowledge of a changing, imperfect reality in eternal and perfect fundaments and principles. However, because postmodernists and pragmatists deny the very split that motivates dualist thought, they also deny that there is such a thing as absolute, unshakeable Truth in the first place and, consequently, that there can be a transcendental grounding to knowledge. In short, both postmodernism and pragmatism are at heart anti-foundationalist, anti-essentialist philosophies.

To bring into focus the differences between anti-foundationalist postmodernism and pragmatism, however, it might be pointed out that the former lacks a positive alternative to the ways of thinking it criticizes, a proper "exit strategy" from its own deconstructive momentum. For that reason, as we have seen, the postmodern anti-foundationalist critique is ultimately self-defeating: the moment postmodernism turns into as a hegemonic, foundational force itself, its critique loses its legitimacy and becomes barren. It might even be argued that postmodernism in its more stringent formulations itself falls victim to the kind of dualist chimaeras it wishes to dissolve. When its anti-foundationalism leads postmodernism to the conclusion that knowledge, truth, and ethics are strictly impossible because they lack objective grounds, it inadvertently resurrects the dualist conviction that such notions *should* have objective grounding in order to be valid or legitimate. Pragmatism, by contrast, combines its critique of dualist, essentialist and foundational thinking with an alternative and more flexible epistemology, or rather, philosophical method, that is in principle self-correcting.

To put it in the simplest of terms, pragmatism brings a Darwinian, evolutionary outlook to philosophy. Its point of departure is that thought and reason are located not outside the natural world (as Platonism and Cartesianism had it) but are themselves intricately part of nature. That is, thought, inquiry, and philosophy are as natural human activities as breathing, walking, and procreating; consequently, human thought, like legs, lungs, and genitals developed in order to deal with problems and issues that arise in people's immediate existence. For that reason, pragmatism refuses to see philosophy as the expression or pursuit of an abstract, theoretical truth that lies outside experience. For pragmatism, the

purpose of thought is neither self-contained nor transcendental; instead, it is *instrumental*. Pragmatism thinks of thought as a *tool*—and the discipline of philosophy as a box full of tools—by which actual problems in this world may be usefully addressed and solved.[64] William James, for instance, one of pragmatism's first and foremost champions, thought of it principally in terms of a philosophic method, rather than a theory or a doctrine. From the outset, James's pragmatic method does not favor any results, but simply intends to assess the *use* or *usefulness* of a notion by tracing its practical consequences. For James, a notion can only be true if it is useful, if it "works," and if it "pays." Conversely, "[a]ny idea upon which we can ride, so to speak; any idea that will carry us prosperously from any one part of our experience to any other part, linking things satisfactorily, working securely, simplifying, saving labor; is true."[65]

Unlike postmodernism, which today is a worldwide cultural phenomenon, pragmatism is first and foremost a North American philosophical discourse, and consequently, its natural habitat as a rule does not extend far beyond the confines of academia. Nonetheless, it is in relation to two dimensions where the problems of contemporary postmodernism arguably manifest themselves most clearly—that is, language and representation, and morality and ethics—that pragmatism offers some remarkably helpful insights. Indeed, core elements of pragmatist thought on these topics may be of considerable use in understanding and theorizing the current scholarly and artistic attempts to move beyond the postmodern impasse.

The postmodern view on language famously cuts the connection between signifier and signified, language and meaning, representation

64 The history of pragmatism is often traced back to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and the works of Charles Sanders Peirce, William James, John Dewey, and others. But it is clear that as a very practice-oriented philosophy, it is firmly rooted in a much older and eminently American intellectual tradition going back to the American Enlightenment, represented by such highly practical thinkers as Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, and John Adams.

65 William James, *Pragmatism* (Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett, 1981), 30. Though it may sound as if James's pragmatist method offers an almost too commonsensical, too everyday solution to complex problems, a proper application of it would not offer any simplistic shortcuts to truth. To the contrary, James suggests that the method rather appears as a "program for more work," because it is necessary to constantly (re-)establish the "practical cash-value" of each philosophical construct or truth claim one makes use of (28). As James points out at a further point, it is "extremely difficult" to formulate true, working theories, "for our theory must mediate between all previous truths and certain new experiences. … To 'work' means both these things; and the squeeze is so tight that there is little loose play for any hypothesis" (98).

and reality: signs refer only to other signs and consequently, language does not offer an objective window on reality. Instead, it is language itself that shapes our image of reality, but that image is always already culturally and ideologically determined, and so, objective, unmediated access to reality is not to be had. With this view on language, the postmodern and deconstructivist critiques were aimed at undermining the old "logocentric" philosophies and doctrines by showing that what they held as "natural" and "objectively true" was in fact culturally constructed, contingent, and relative. But as I have tried to make clear in the previous section, the postmodern critique is ultimately self-defeating, because if everything that used to have stable meaning is ultimately groundless and relative, there can be no reason to value one groundless, relative meaning over the other. Indeed, when anything goes, nothing seems to really matter anymore—including, of course, postmodernism itself—and the world turns into a meaningless, amoral place. Of course, few postmodernists would embrace such a cynical, nihilist worldview, yet the point is that a strict, dogmatic adherence to postmodern precepts would seem to result in a reality or existence that can only slip through our fingers like a handful of sand.

By contrast, this self-destructive tendency within postmodernism is lacking in pragmatist epistemology, a difference which can be attributed to a considerable extent to pragmatism's views on such elemental things as language and morality. Like postmodernism, pragmatism denies that language *represents* reality, that is to say, that language would show or mirror things as they "really" are, without any mediation. But whereas postmodernism replaces a traditional representational view of language with a *self*-representational view, pragmatism instead offers an *instrumental* view on language. At the simplest level, pragmatism considers language as a tool that human beings use to get things done. Language in that sense is a tool just like any other tool: in principle, its use resides in effectuating practical consequences, as with hammers, cars, and computers. Yet language is also the most important and the most powerful tool that humans possess: it is "the tool of tools," as John Dewey puts it.[66] In fact, Dewey usefully compares language with money. Like money, language consists of a system of substitutes and surrogates which indicate not essences but potential relations. The point here is that precisely as such a system of potential relations, language and money enable not just the simple, one time exchange of goods or meanings. Instead, they facilitate

66 John Dewey, *Experience and Nature*, 2nd ed. (New York: Dover, 1958), 168.

the emergence of a potentially infinite number of new and unforeseen relations, whether commercial interactions or meanings, and hence a potentially infinite number of practical possibilities and consequences.[67] Thus, the purpose of the tool of language is not representation but *communication*, or, the process of constructing and exchanging the meaningful relations through which humans are able to manage the world around them to their own benefit.[68] In short, the attraction of viewing language in instrumental terms is that it avoids not only the imperious logocentric mistakes of those who consider language in traditional representational terms, but also the ultimately debilitating conclusion, implicit in postmodernism, that we are always caged by language and forever excluded from reality. For pragmatism, our meanings may be groundless, but they are not useless; moreover, they may be culturally determined and thus contingent, but even as such, they are as much of nature and therefore as real as everything else is. And it precisely from such a perspective that recent efforts to renew and reassert the possibilities of meaning and reference after postmodernism appear not as naive or impossible, but rather as part of the ever-changing and contingent human efforts to make sense of the world.

In a similar way, pragmatist insights can also be helpful in calling to a halt the sense of moral corrosion postmodernism is felt to inspire. From the perspective of pragmatism, the fact that postmodernism has scrupulously dissected and broken down all traditional human values does *not* mean that the world is void of morality and ethics or that it necessarily falls victim to nihilism—on the contrary. "Morality and law," Richard Rorty points out, are both invented "when we can no longer just do what comes naturally, when routine is no longer good enough, or when habit and custom no longer suffice."[69] In the wake of postmodernism, then, it is precisely because of the absence and impossibility of universally valid

67 Dewey, *Experience and Nature*, 173–174.

68 "When communication occurs," Dewey writes,

> all natural events are subject to reconsideration and revision; they are re-adapted to meet the requirements of conversation, whether it be public discourse or that preliminary discourse termed thinking. … Where communication exists, things in acquiring meaning, thereby acquire representatives, surrogates, signs and implicates, which are infinitely more amenable to management, more permanent and more accommodating, than events in their first estate. *Experience and Nature*, 166–167.

69 Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope* (London: Penguin, 1999), 73.

principles that the most basic moral questions about how people are supposed to live with each other return with stark urgency. Like postmodernism, pragmatism rejects the notion that ethics and morality would be able to offer any universally valid, transcendental standards of right and wrong. But whereas this leads postmodernism to deconstruct the inner contradictions and limitations of *any* moral system, pragmatism is more willing to accept such systems precisely as historically contingent attempts to determine what is right and wrong in settings that are likewise historically contingent.[70] Here too, pragmatism's point is that morality, like language, is nothing more or less than a useful tool. If language is the "tool of tools" by which people construct an increasing number of meaningful relations in a general sense, morality has a more specific applicability: it is a tool for establishing (ever more) equitable connections between (ever more) people to whom immediately felt, natural connections (like blood relations) are absent. And so, attempts (like Derrida's) to reformulate an ethics and renew a sense of morality after postmodernism are both necessary *and* possible—but only as contingent, make-shift, and practical solutions, rather than eternally fixed principles.

Of course, as part of my larger project of demonstrating the usefulness of pragmatism in attending to some of the contemporary problems of postmodernism, my portrayal here of pragmatism as a body of thought is of necessity greatly condensed and simplified. Yet by focusing on pragmatism's "bare essentials," it is certainly not my intention to gloss over the more problematic dimensions of pragmatist thought. In fact, there is no sense in denying that pragmatism, like any other philosophical discourse, has its own particular problems and blind spots. Generally, critics of pragmatism have objected against what they consider its unwarranted optimism, its political passivity and conservatism, its inadequacy in responding to conflict and violence, and its inability to recognize that the conditions of pragmatist thought do not apply always, everywhere, and to everyone. In fact, in its appeals to reason, equity, and efficacy, pragmatism is relatively blind to issues of power, inequality, and its own ideological

70 From such a perspective, it is particularly significant that Rorty in the quotation presented above mentions morality and law in the same breath: after all, lawyers and legalists have made it their profession to emphasize that what is right does *not* speak for itself. Indeed, they refer to the law as an extremely useful tool to determine what is right. Unlike most (moral) philosophers, moreover, they recognize as an intrinsic part of their profession that what is right not always coincides with the law and that in such cases it is necessary to disobey or change the law. Like the law, morality is a living set of human constructs—not a bunch of dead letters or a collection of unchanging transcendental principles.

assumptions. It thus fails to see that to think and act reasonably and equitably require a limited sense of material comfort, and that they are in fact luxuries made possible by an unequal division of labor. Though these are serious concerns indeed, this is not the occasion to address them in any great depth. Nonetheless, there are two points to be made that may serve to deflect these critiques or at least assuage them to some extent.

In the first place, it is important not to simplify the pragmatist perspective as an insufficiently self-reflexive or self-critical hegemonic perspective. Certainly, there can be no question about the fact that pragmatism's political loyalties lie with liberal democracy rather than with, say, Marxism. Indeed, pragmatism has been called the philosophy of democracy (by John Dewey), and has also often been referred to as a quintessentially American philosophy.[71] As such, pragmatism can perhaps be allied to the present "hegemonic" system in the common sense of the term, but not so in the Gramscian sense of hegemony, which would imply that pragmatism can only serve vested interests. To the contrary, if philosophy traditionally was a conservative force, serving the interests of the ruling class, someone like John Dewey, as Rorty explains, saw it as "an instrument of change rather than of conservation" (29). Replacing dualist metaphysics with a way of thinking that determines the truth of a concept by determining its practical consequences, "[p]ragmatism would, for the first time, treat theory as an aid to practice, rather than seeing practice as a degradation of theory" (30). Such a philosophy, moreover, "would, for the first time, put the intellectuals at the service of the productive rather than the leisure class" (30). At least in theory then, pragmatism in contrast to much traditional philosophy would serve the interests of the many—or even of all—rather than the few.

Pragmatism's emphasis on "usefulness" may serve as an illustration of why pragmatism is, at least in principle, a progressive rather than a conservative perspective. Pragmatism's view of knowledge and morality as that which "works" or that which is "useful" does not mean that what is true and what is right may simply be established through the exercise of sheer force. This "usefulness" is in fact a philosophically much more complex notion than its utilitarian, everyday connotations may suggest. It certainly does not mean that when we are hungry we may steal a loaf of bread. After all, if this were the custom, we might by the same logic be stolen from by others. This is clearly not to our benefit, and therefore this is not what a pragmatist would term useful. By contrast, something

71 Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope*, 23–24. Hereafter cited in the text.

is useful when it is to the (equal) benefit of all parties involved—for instance when we can come to an agreement with the baker on a fair price for the loaf of bread. This is not as simple as it seems, as this sense of usefulness is always a very "tight squeeze," as Williams James might have said[72]: after all, the baker can charge too high a price or sell sub-standard products and thus falsify the transaction. Pragmatism's insistence on the "tight squeeze" insures that what is true and what is right can never be taken for granted or enforced from the outset. In principle, they must be put to the test in every practical situation and prove their validity under critical scrutiny. As a progressive corollary to this epistemological principle, moreover, that which is not true, not right, or not just, may then be critiqued and eventually be redefined or set right. The only problem with this perspective, however, is that it assumes an ideal democratic situation where everyone is equally capable of judging truth from falsehood and right from wrong, and where everyone can enter the debate on equal terms and without limitations. And this, one might argue, is unfortunately not the case.[73] To a certain degree, therefore, pragmatism may not be sensitive enough to the ways in which the production of what is right and true is always already an unfair or rigged game. Indeed, ideology and relations of power may constitute and influence the game in such a manner that even though it seems that all parties benefit equally, in actuality one party systematically benefits more than the other(s).

To be sure, this argument may be countered in a variety of ways from a pragmatist perspective itself.[74] Yet for brevity's sake it may be more

72 See note 65.

73 In fact, it might be argued that as a notably pragmatist take on ethnicity and identity, David Hollinger's postethnic theory, discussed in chapter 4, runs into precisely these kinds of problems. Hollinger may well argue that "[i]ndividuals should be allowed to affiliate or disaffiliate with their own communities of descent to an extent that they choose." But this is to envision an ideal situation, while the reality is that many Americans are *not* allowed this freedom. Hollinger, though, is the first to acknowledge that his vision of a postethnic America is idealist and still far from realized. But for him that is no reason not to work toward it. Even if the ideal vision itself may ever be out of reach, much is still to be gained in trying to realize it. As he writes in true pragmatist fashion, "[o]ne need not believe in an American genius to contemplate the actual history of cultural creativity that has taken place within the United States over the course of the last two hundred years. … The history that has led so many citizens of the United States to call themselves Americans is just as real as is the history that yields the identities brought here amid diasporas." David A. Hollinger, *Postethnic America: Beyond Multiculturalism* (New York: BasicBooks, 1995), 116, 160–161.

74 One might argue, for instance, that this critique does not undermine the epistemological principle at stake at all, but only criticizes (rightly) the unfair and in-

helpful, in the second place, to point out that pragmatism is fundamentally an open-ended, inclusive, and self-correcting epistemological orientation. Therefore, it is always possible to draw from a range of critical traditions such as postcolonialism, feminism, and (neo- and/or post-)Marxism in order to counter pragmatism's deficits and blind spots. Thus, forces may be combined in order to effectively theorize postmodernism's ongoing reconfigurations. In fact, to do so would strike me precisely as the proper pragmatist thing to do. Again, then: I am not embracing either the work of a single pragmatist thinker or a distinct school of classical or neo-pragmatist thought, nor do I wish to propose pragmatism as a wholesale alternative to postmodernism. Instead, I argue that it is specifically in the effort of thinking beyond the current crisis of postmodernism that the most basic and central tenets derived from pragmatist thought, many of which have already been formulated more than eighty years ago, are of particular usefulness. However, by no means does this imply that the way beyond postmodernism is an exclusively pragmatist trajectory—quite the contrary.

To sum up, the crisis of postmodernism means that such important philosophical concepts as representation and meaning, and morality and ethics cannot be abandoned, even if they lack objective grounds outside experience. Due to its highly flexible, evolutionary, and utilitarian epistemology, however, pragmatism offers a rationale for continuing to use these concepts in ways that take on board the momentous lessons of postmodernism, but avoid being stalled by the conundrums and irresolvable paradoxes the latter is plagued with. Thus, pragmatism offers both a theoretical perspective on the possibilities of moving beyond postmodernism—or rather, of reconfiguring it—as well as a conceptual framework for analyzing and understanding renewalist efforts in the arts and humanities. Josh Toth is much concerned with the idea that such renewalist efforts after postmodernism cannot ultimately guard against the "specter of teleology," because their declared conviction to guard against teleology may itself become dogmatic and teleological. In other words, any reconfiguration of postmodernism would end up becoming itself a new grand narrative. A pragmatist perspective appreciates the point, but is much less worried by it. For pragmatism, thought offers a variety of tools to deal with certain problems. Accordingly, pragmatism is ever aware of the fact that tools are subject to wear and tear, that new and better tools may become available,

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equitable organization of society or democracy. Again, it is useful to recall William James who writes that the pragmatist method "appears less as a solution, … than as a program for more work." James, *Pragmatism*, 28.

and that the problems to which one's tools are put to use may change over time, causing the tools to lose their efficacy. As a result, that renewalism will run into problems—whether the specters of teleology or simply those of decay and obsolescence—is only natural and to be expected. But from a pragmatist perspective, it is just as natural and expected that such failed renewalist solutions may in time be corrected and renewed themselves. The attraction of viewing renewalism from a pragmatist perspective, then, is that it is not only realistic about the make-shift nature of the solutions to postmodern problems it proposes, but also that it offers a method that is self-correcting by nature.

To those used to the abstruse dialectics of "high" theory, such pragmatist reconfigurations of postmodernism may sound laughably unsophisticated and artless. Ultimately, however, it is in *practice*, not in theory, that the advantages of pragmatism are felt most acutely.[75] It is interesting to note, in this respect, that when Toth turns his attention away from theory toward individual artworks, his concerns about renewalism's potential teleological problems loom far less ominously. Thus, he identifies an emergent strategy in much recent fiction that "abandons the increasingly nihilistic (or, we might say, suicidal) trajectory of postmodern metafiction while simultaneously and perhaps paradoxically embracing the postmodern rejection of a distinctly modernist form of idealism." This paradoxical strategy is made possible not by a strict adherence to whichever theory, but, precisely, by not being too concerned by them. Indeed, Toth suggests, "*the literature of renewalism* can be defined as an attempt to *relax the rules*"; or, if you like, it can be characterized by a certain impiety that enables a sense of renewal after postmodernism.[76] Interestingly, the Jewish American fiction central to this study reflects a similarly liberal attitude. As I have demonstrated in chapters 3 and 5, Nathan Englander, Jonathan Safran Foer, Nicole Krauss, and Michael Chabon employ various forms of impiety to breathe new life into both the memory of the Holocaust as well as Jewishness. But even though it is postmodernism that makes possible these authors' impieties, their writing seems aimed not at postmodern destabilization and deconstruction, but rather at something more positive and (re)constructive. In fact, by "relaxing the rules," these authors seem determined to reclaim (new) possibilities of meaning and signification in

75 John Dewey points out that "dialectically the modernist [i.e. pragmatist thinker] is easy prey to the traditionalist [i.e. dualist thinker]; he carries so many of the conceptions of the latter in his intellectual outfit that he is readily confuted." However, "[i]t is his practice not his theory that gets him ahead." Dewey, *Experience and Nature*, 154.

76 Toth, *The Passing of Postmodernism*, 89, 123. Italics in original.

the wake of postmodernism. The next chapter, therefore, is concerned with the multifarious ways in which this fiction explores possibilities of (post-postmodern) renewal, and specifically with the ways in which the memory of the Holocaust is closely intertwined in that process.

7

Post-Postmodern "Entertainment"

The Holocaust and Renewalism in Contemporary Jewish American Fiction

Though to proclaim the end of postmodernism may itself be a characteristically postmodern gesture, it is certainly the case that in recent years the limitations of the postmodern paradigm have clearly come into focus.[1] It is broadly perceived today that postmodernism effectively leads to a certain epistemological as well as moral impasse, a kind of void where anything goes but nothing makes sense. Consequently, the challenge for a great many contemporary artists and thinkers is to renew the possibilities, precisely, of making sense again in ways that steer clear of postmodernism's seemingly all-consuming, radically deconstructive impulses, but without falling back upon the foundationalist certainties of earlier paradigms. In short, such efforts must avoid the ultimately dogmatic and teleological thinking which characterizes *both* postmodernism as well as what preceded it—in short, the type of thinking that promises definitive answers. According to Josh Toth, however, such efforts are *in principle* bound to fail, because the call to "respect the specter [of teleology]," as he terms the challenge to move beyond postmodernism's legacy, already represents a new teleological imperative: something that *must* be done. Ironically, however, Toth also points out that in the field of literature these emerging renewalist impulses appear to be characterized precisely by not bothering too much about matters of principle. Indeed, Toth suggests that "*the literature of renewalism* can be defined as an attempt to *relax the rules*."[2]

1 The idea that to proclaim the end of postmodernism is in itself a characteristically postmodern gesture is presented in various ways by Herbert de Vriese in "Is er Leven na de Doodverklaring? Over het Postmodernisme van de Tweede Generatie," in *Het Postmodernisme Voorbij*, ed. Loes Derksen, Edwin Koster, and Jan van der Stoep (Amsterdam: VU University Press, 2008), 37–53.

2 Josh Toth, *The Passing of Postmodernism: A Spectroanalysis of the Contemporary* (Albany: State University Press of New York, 2010), 89, 123. Italics in original.

A certain willingness to "relax the rules" is also what marks the Holocaust-inflected writings of Michael Chabon, Jonathan Safran Foer, and Nicole Krauss in various ways.[3] These writers impiously challenge and subvert the traditional orthodoxies surrounding the (literary) representation of the Holocaust, while at the same time allowing themselves great imaginative liberties in engaging with matters of Jewish identity and history more generally. To them, the Holocaust and Jewishness are clearly neither sacred nor immutable; their significance is rather constantly reasserted and discursively reconstructed, in ways inevitably affected by the concerns of the present. This approach clearly bespeaks a thoroughly postmodern sensibility, yet it lacks the sense of irresponsible detachment and relativism that is increasingly associated with postmodernism. Indeed, these authors' impieties do not belittle or berate either the memory of the Holocaust or Jewish history and culture. Quite the contrary, it is precisely their unorthodox and impious treatments of these themes that serve to rejuvenate and renew their significance in a twenty-first century US context. Thus, their "relaxing the rules" is not so much a sign of a putatively "postmodern" detachment and relativism, but rather of a renewed sense of commitment to reestablish possibilities of (moral) signification in the wake of postmodernism.

Indeed, Chabon, Foer, and Krauss's ways of "relaxing the rules" appear closely related to the contemporary renewalist efforts that Toth is concerned with. It is striking, moreover, that these authors' efforts to relax the rules concerning the representation of the Holocaust as well as Jewish identity and history coincide with—and, as I will argue further on, are in fact *predicated* on—a very hopeful and characteristically renewalist restoration of faith in the power of literature. In fact, this was already explored to some degree in earlier discussions; in Chabon's *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*, for example, Joe Kavalier finds in comic books an enormously powerful means of "escape" from the horrors of history through which he ultimately learns to deal with them. In Nicole Krauss's *The History of Love*, moreover, isolated characters and lives ruined by the Holocaust are brought to a sense of meaningful communion despite time and distance, and, significantly, through the unlikely survival of a fiction. And in Foer's *Everything Is Illuminated* and Chabon's *The Yiddish Policemen's Union*, it is through patently fictional means that these authors are

3 The "post-postmodern" or renewalist tendencies that I am concerned with in this chapter may be identified in the work of all four Jewish American authors central to this study. But I feel their presence is more pronounced in the writing of Chabon, Foer, and Kraus than in that of Nathan Englander. For that reason, in the present chapter I choose to focus on the former three and not to discuss Englander's work.

able to resurrect something of their Yiddish and Eastern European Jewish heritage that was lost in the Holocaust. Additionally, in interviews and essays these authors each tend to emphasize that literature, whatever its abilities to subvert, is first and foremost an ethical and moral discourse. Or more precisely, they each embrace literature as a medium that facilitates a form of meaningful communication that is able to imaginatively connect people in ways not to be had elsewhere.

Jonathan Safran Foer, for instance, recounts that "I write because I want to end my loneliness. Books make people less alone. That, before and after everything else, is what books do. They show us that conversations are possible across distances." Indeed, "the entire purpose of the enterprise is to hook up like minds," he suggests.[4] Nicole Krauss also attributes much weight to a similar kind of interpersonal conversation through books: "I write because I want to reach people and have the kind of conversation with them that can happen only through a book. It's one of the most beautiful conversations there is, I think."[5] Michael Chabon, finally, proposes that "[a]rt … asserts the possibility of fellowship in a world built entirely from the materials of solitude. The novelist, the cartoonist, the songwriter, knows that the gesture is doomed from the beginning but makes it anyway, flashes his or her bit of mirror, not on the chance that the signal will be seen or understood but as if such a chance existed."[6] Quoting David Foster Wallace, Chabon suggests that fiction gives us "imaginative access to other selves" (266). And even if that access to other selves can only be imaginative, Chabon suggests it nonetheless serves an important moral function: "[t]he purpose or the blessing of that kind of access—which I have often thought of and characterized by means of the word *escape*—is ultimately to increase our sense of shared experience, of shared suffering, rapture,

4 Jonathan Safran Foer, interview by Deborah Solomon, *New York Times Magazine*, February 27, 2005, http://www.nytimes.com/2005/02/27/magazine/27FOER.html?pagewanted=all&position=; Jonathan Safran Foer, interview by Robert Birnbaum, *Identitytheory.com*, May 26, 2003, http://www.identitytheory.com/jonathan-safran-foer/. In the interview with Birnbaum, Foer further explains what he means by the "hooking up of like minds" through literature by suggesting that "[t]he reason you stick with the Toni Morrison and maybe don't stick with *Finnegan's Wake* or some other thing is because you feel like at the end of the day you are going to learn something human, not really something intellectual. At the bottom of that is that you think that Toni Morrison and you have something in common. Something deeper than the circumstances of our lives that has to do with being a person."

5 Nicole Krauss, interview by Alden Mudge, *Bookpage.com*, May 2005, http://bookpage.com/interview/the-strength-to-survive.

6 Michael Chabon, *Manhood for Amateurs: The Pleasures and Regrets of a Husband, Father, and Son* (New York: Harper, 2009), 5. Hereafter cited in the text.

nostalgia, or disgust, with our fellow humans, whose thoughts and emotions are otherwise locked away" (266).[7]

Clearly, these Jewish American authors share a lot of common ground with regard to what they see as literature's most valuable and perhaps unique possibilities within contemporary culture. Moreover, these kind of poetical and aesthetical remarks further suggest that these authors may be viewed as closely associated with recent renewalist efforts to move beyond postmodernism. However, since renewalism is characterized by its willingness to relax the rules, it comes as no surprise that in their work each of these authors approaches the challenge of postmodernism from highly personal and idiosyncratic perspectives, offering at once quite different solutions in their novels. Michael Chabon, for instance, explores the possibilities of "escapism," that is, indulgence in the pleasures of genre fiction and popular culture. In fact, he proposes that escapism may function as a valid response to the traumas of history as much as a way of connecting with other people and developing an ethical sense in a postmodern age. In *Everything Is Illuminated*, Jonathan Safran Foer appears to have a similar objective, yet he pursues it in a strikingly different manner: for him, a central trope is an unfathomable absence or void at the core of history and human existence, which, he suggests, might best be faced, or even embraced, through radical forms of fabulation. Indeed, he suggests that it is precisely by acknowledging the impossibility of signification, communication, and ethics that such values can in a paradoxical sense be renewed. Finally, what haunts Nicole Krauss's *The History of Love* as well as *Great House* (which I have not discussed so far), is a great sense of human isolation, fragmentation, and scattering. Inviting the reader to follow her on a leap of faith, however, Krauss tentatively suggests ways in which literature might connect people, and ways in which imaginative efforts may serve to stitch together widely scattered fragments into a fragile though nonetheless meaningful fabric. In short, these authors' individual renewalist responses to the postmodern crisis clearly result in very different literary strategies and in very different types of novels. At the same time, there are remarkable similarities and points of overlap between these different approaches. Most strikingly, the respective key operating tropes that appear to characterize these works as renewalist are all in one way or another strongly motivated by the memory of the Holocaust. Indeed, it appears that it is precisely the memory of the Holocaust that offers a powerful

7 Significantly, Chabon makes these comments in the context of a broader discussion of the suicide of David Foster Wallace, as well as Chabon's wife's bipolar disorder.

stimulant to search for means of making sense in ways more meaningful, human, and moral than those offered by postmodernism.

Before I turn to discuss these authors and their work in more detail, it is necessary to consider at some length the very idea that the memory of the Holocaust may be central to efforts of renewalism after postmodernism. From an intellectual history perspective, this may seem nothing short of astounding, since, after all, the Holocaust is often referred to as the historical event which *defeats* any traditional conception of morality, meaning, and values. In fact, as Jeffrey Alexander has suggested, such a "tragic framing of the Holocaust fundamentally contributed to postmodern relativism and disquiet."[8] Postwar intellectuals from Theodor Adorno, George Steiner, and Elie Wiesel to Emmanuel Levinas, Jean-François Lyotard, and Jacques Derrida have emphasized that long treasured liberal humanist notions of Western civilization could not prevent the murder of millions during the Holocaust. And some have gone as far as to suggest that they even made these crimes possible. Through the works of these and other intellectuals, the Holocaust came to be seen, in the words of Andreas Huyssen, as

> a cipher for the twentieth century as a whole and for the failure of the project of enlightenment. It serves as proof of Western civilization's failure to practice anamnesis, to reflect on its constitutive inability to live in peace with difference and otherness, and to draw the consequences from the insidious relationship between enlightened modernity, racial oppression, and organized violence.[9]

From this perspective, it became necessary for the very pillars of Western civilization to be scrupulously criticized and deconstructed, in which process postmodernism is often regarded as playing a central part. In fact, it is often suggested that postmodernism is closely related to the Holocaust and can even be seen as a response to it.[10]

8 Jeffrey C. Alexander, "The Social Construction of Moral Universals," in *Remembering the Holocaust: A Debate*, by Jeffrey C. Alexander et al. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 34.

9 Andreas Huyssen, "Present Pasts: Media, Politics, Amnesia," *Public Culture* 12, no. 1 (2000): 24. doi: 10.1215/08992363-12-1-21.

10 On this topic, see especially Robert Eaglestone, *The Holocaust and the Postmodern* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); and Alan Milchman and Alan Rosenberg, eds., *Postmodernism and the Holocaust* (Amsterdam and Atlanta: Rodopi, 1998). See also Dan Stone, ed. *Theoretical Interpretations of the Holocaust* (Amsterdam and Atlanta: Rodopi, 2001); Eric Santner, "Postwar / Post-Holocaust / Postmodern: Some Reflections on the Discourses of Mourning," chap. 1 in *Stranded Objects: Mourning, Memory, and Film in Postwar Germany* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990).

To a certain extent, the legacy of the kind of (postmodern—or perhaps rather "post-modern") thinking that views the Holocaust as the ultimate manifestation of the bankruptcy of modernity or civilization is also present in the work of Chabon, Foer, and Krauss. The Holocaust in their writing underlines in various ways the ultimate fragility and precariousness of existence and civilization, as well as the fact that there can no longer be any absolute certainty about anything. In an important sense, the presence of the Holocaust in this writing functions as a powerful symbol of a feeling of postmodern absence at the root of existence, and signals how these authors are closely attuned to a postmodern sensibility. Yet at the same time, and in true postmodern fashion, their Holocaust impiety also challenges the dogmatism that seems to inform this very bleak, relativist perspective. That is to say, these authors also seem to refer to the Holocaust to underscore precisely that it is still necessary, possible, and justifiable to continue to make sense of life and history, and to strive for some degree of interpersonal comity—in spite of the postmodern lack of ultimate foundations. But they do so even while realizing that their efforts can of necessity only be of a make-shift and preliminary nature. In a way then, these authors' Holocaust impiety is made possible by postmodernism, but challenges it at the same time. Yet this does not mean that these novels get stuck in an impossible balancing act between postmodernism and that which would succeed it. In fact, I contend that the paradoxical demands made upon these authors by the memory of the Holocaust is instrumental in leading them to respond to the crisis of the postmodern by offering highly pragmatist solutions—solutions that are valuable and useful not because they are final, but precisely because they are temporary, make-shift, and patently imaginative.

In this respect it is particularly illuminating to briefly reflect upon the Freudian concepts of "acting out" and "working through" as they have been developed in the work of Dominick LaCapra. As LaCapra explains, acting out is a mode of response that occurs among victims of trauma and "is related to repetition, and even the repetition compulsion—the tendency to repeat something compulsively."[11] In its starkest form, acting out represents a sense of full identification with trauma as an experience one cannot control nor understand, but only compulsively return to and even re-experience: "[i]n acting out, tenses implode, and it is as if one were back there in the past reliving the traumatic scene. Any duality (or double inscription) of time (past and present or future) is experientially collapsed

11 Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 2001), 142. Hereafter cited in the text.

or productive only of aporias and double binds" (21). Working through, by contrast, represents a mode in which one is able to regard a traumatic experience from a certain (critical) distance. It is "an articulatory practice: to the extent one works through trauma … , one is able to distinguish between past and present and to recall in memory that something happened to one (or one's people) back then while realizing that one is living here and now with openings to the future" (22).[12]

What is particularly interesting about LaCapra's use of these Freudian concepts, however, is that he employs them in order to critically distinguish between different forms of "trauma writing," which for LaCapra includes much (post)modern literature as well as much poststructuralist and postmodern theory and criticism. From such a perspective, it might be argued that much (exceptionalist) writing about the Holocaust, in as far as it insists on the inadequacy of language to represent Auschwitz, on silence, and on unspeakability, employs the dynamics of "acting out" as its dominant mode of representation. Furthermore, "acting out" also seems to inform much postmodern writing, from its unrelenting insistence on the textual nature of our perception of reality to its indulgence in "free-play." In fact, LaCapra seems to suggest as much when he writes that "[s]ome of the most powerful forms of modern art and writing, as well as some of the most compelling forms of criticism (including forms of deconstruction), often seem to be traumatic writing or post-traumatic writing in closest proximity to trauma" (23). Significantly, these forms of writing may "involve the feeling of keeping faith with trauma in a manner that leads to a compulsive preoccupation with aporia, an endlessly melancholic, impossible mourning, and a resistance to working through" (23). By contrast, it seems that with regard to the Holocaust the writing of Chabon, Foer, and Krauss is more interested precisely in the dynamics of working through, which is expressed by and indeed predicated on a notably pragmatist (re)investment in literature and fiction, or somewhat more generally conceived, in the *fictive*. By this term, I mean that which is consciously and overtly constructed, invented, imagined and imaginative. Consequently, its value is to be located in its contingent and fallible everyday usefulness,

12 Or, as LaCapra explains further on, "[i]n working through, the person tries to gain critical distance on a problem and to distinguish between past, present, and future." Moreover, "working through does not mean avoidance, harmonization, simply forgetting the past, or submerging oneself in the present. It means coming to terms with the trauma, including its details, and critically engaging the tendency to act out the past and even to recognize why it may be necessary and even in certain respects desirable or at least compelling." *Writing History*, 143, 144.

rather than its correspondence to an unchanging transcendental realm of (objective) truth.

Connecting something as seemingly lightweight as the fictive with a historical memory as grave as the Holocaust might on the surface seem callous or irresponsible. However, if there is an incongruity here, it is not one of weight and profundity, but of distance: the distance between the symbolic order in which fiction operates and the events of the Holocaust themselves. Chabon, Foer, and Krauss's unabashed and open reliance on fiction distances their art from the events of the Holocaust, but it is also precisely the distance afforded by fiction that enables these authors to engage with these events in the first place. Fiction, that is, may not be able to "say the unsayable," as Jean-François Lyotard has noted, but what it *can* do is "[say] that it cannot say it."[13] Indeed, as a fundamentally symbolic art form, fiction is able to acknowledge and engage with the "unspeakable" Holocaust in potentially endless ways, yet without incorporating it. Thus, fiction produces a sense of agency and opens up a space for critical reflection. And for that reason, to invest in the *fictive* is precisely to explore the possibilities of working through.

However, this investment in the fictive as a mode of working through is not only relevant in relation to the representation of the Holocaust. From a somewhat broader perspective, this approach seems in fact closely intertwined with a more general concern in these authors' work to explore paths beyond postmodernism. In fact, I contend that their literary treatment of the Holocaust is at once symptomatic and indicative of a larger "post-postmodern" and renewalist effort. Postmodernism may have deconstructed such things as meaning, knowledge, and morality, revealing that these grand narratives lack objective grounds and are therefore *fictions*.[14] Yet the present renewalist literature suggests that those deconstructed grand narratives and fictions harbor new artistic opportunities and possibilities of signification as well. Indeed, the work of Chabon, Foer, and Krauss shows—not least through its engagements with the memory of the Holocaust—that precisely as *fictions* such deconstructed concepts are still relevant and significant. That is to say, what matters to these authors is no longer revealing the fictionality of lived reality, but demonstrating the reality and significance of the very fictions that shape our lives. Precisely as (Holocaust-inflected)

13 Jean-François Lyotard, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 47.

14 Indeed, the Holocaust itself is such a "fiction." This is not to deny the Holocaust as a historical event, but to emphasize that our knowledge of that history is inevitably mediated by language.

fiction, therefore, this Jewish American writing bears witness to the lack of foundations that marks contemporary existence. But it also emphasizes the urgent need for, and what Josh Toth calls "impossible possibility" of, some kind of moral and significatory orientation in order to make sense of (contemporary) existence.[15] In this sense, these authors demonstrate what Toth suggests is the "defining characteristic" of the recently emerging renewalist forms, namely the "insistence on the possibility of what [these narrative forms] paradoxically continue to expose as impossible: meaning, truth, mimesis, telos, communal understanding, and communication" (103).

Renewalism and "Entertainment": Michael Chabon

Of the Jewish American authors central to this study, Michael Chabon has expressed himself most explicitly about the challenges and attractions of writing fiction in full awareness of both the memory of the Holocaust and postmodernism. As Chabon confesses in the opening essay of his collection *Maps and Legends: Reading and Writing along the Borderlands*:

> I read for entertainment, and I write to entertain. Period. Oh, I could decoct a brew of other, more impressive motivations and explanations. I could uncork some stuff about reader response theory, or the Lacanian *parole*. … I could go down to the café at the local mega-bookstore and take some wise words of Abelard or Koestler about the power of literature off a mug. But in the end—here's my point—it would still all boil down to *entertainment*, and its suave henchman, pleasure.[16]

Though clearly well-versed in the language of postmodernism himself, Chabon nonetheless resists some postmodernists' partiality to an overly cerebral and pretentious aesthetic. Instead, he argues in favor of a more down to earth conception of literature that is more in tune with literature's original and most basic function, namely telling a good story. His favored approach to that purpose is in fact genre fiction, and all of his works in which the memory of the Holocaust play a significant role—*The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay* (2000), *The Final Solution* (2005), and *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* (2007)—are indeed immersive genre fictions that unabashedly emulate in part or in whole the styles and conventions of vintage pulp fiction genres.

15 Toth, *The Passing of Postmodernism*, 80. Hereafter cited in the text.

16 Michael Chabon, "Trickster in a Suit of Lights: Thoughts on the Modern Short Story," in *Maps and Legends: Reading and Writing Along the Borderlands* (San Francisco: McSweeney's, 2008), 14. Hereafter cited in the text.

Significantly, Chabon's predilection for genre fiction is not motivated by sheer callousness and insensitivity. It is rather an informed and well-considered choice that depends upon a highly inclusive revaluation of the very notion of "entertainment" itself. Indeed, Chabon proposes "expanding our definition of entertainment to encompass everything pleasurable that arises from the encounter of an attentive mind with a page of literature" (14). Significantly, then, Chabon's vindication of "entertainment" does not represent a simple return to the genteel and naive pleasures of nineteenth century realism, nor a surrender to a market reigned by a one-dimensional, insipid kind of prose. It is instead a way of reclaiming and rejuvenating those realms of the art of fiction that, Chabon feels, have sadly been neglected in recent years; it is a way of reinventing and reconstituting literature's full potential, not only as an artistic force but also precisely as a communicative and moral force. Lamenting the fact that the notion of entertainment has become tainted through (false) associations with mindless pleasure and solipsistic passivity (16), he emphasizes that

> [t]he original sense of the word 'entertainment' is a lovely one of mutual support through intertwining, like a pair of trees grown together, interwoven, each sustaining and bearing up the other. It suggests a kind of midair transfer of strength, contact across a void, like the tangling of cable and steel between two lonely bridgeheads. I can't think of a better approximation of the relation between reader and writer. (15)

For Chabon, then, literature is a medium that is able forge meaningful connections between people, bringing them into significance and protecting them from isolation in the meaningless void. As he writes, "entertainment—as I define it, pleasure and all—remains the only sure means we have of bridging, or at least feeling as if we have bridged, the gulf of consciousness that separates each of us from everybody else."[17] Indeed, for Chabon, the "entertainment" made possible by literature offers, in the tradition of Scheherazade, a form of survival in the desert, and a balm to the crisis of postmodernism. As I will demonstrate in what follows, Chabon's notion of entertainment is a remarkably useful concept for understanding not only his own Holocaust-inflected work in terms of renewalism after postmodernism, but that of Jonathan Safran Foer and Nicole Krauss as well.

17 And as Chabon further notes, "[t]he best response to those who would cheapen and exploit it is not to disparage or repudiate but to reclaim entertainment as a job fit for artists and for audiences, a two-way exchange of attention, experience, and the universal hunger for connection" (17).

Within Chabon's oeuvre, *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay* arguably offers the most unequivocally renewalist exploration of the forces of "entertainment"[18]: against a backdrop much darkened by the reality of the Holocaust, it celebrates not only comic books and their powers of "escapism," but also the pleasures of plot-driven narrative. Thus, in the face of destruction, it seems to try and restore faith in literature and in life itself by offering a sense of positive release. Many of these themes I already explored at length in chapter 3, where I discussed how Joe Kavalier, one of the two main characters, tries to negotiate the distance between the horrors of the Holocaust in Europe and the seductive pleasures of life in America through various forms of "escapism." On this occasion, I want to return to these themes but address them in somewhat different terms. I will not be concerned so much with the ways in which the distance between America and the Holocaust is mediated; instead I wish to address how *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*, precisely as such a Holocaust-centered story, can be seen as mounting a renewalist effort to overcome the characteristic problems associated with postmodernism.

An important indicator here is the very form of the novel itself. What is most striking about *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay* is that it offers an immersive, more or less realist narrative full of action and romance. In fact, whereas in recent decades "serious" literature under the influence of postmodernism has often insisted on employing radically disorienting and disruptive narrative strategies, especially so when war or the Holocaust is involved, Chabon by contrast self-consciously embraces the formats of popular genre fictions. In fact, the novel is structured to a considerable extent according to the model of the classic (Jewish) immigrant narrative, where the protagonist, going from rags to riches, lives the American Dream. Additionally, it contains a number of short-story-like chapters that clearly emulate the styles, plots, and very atmosphere of period comic books, and thus use prose to recount, for instance, the origins of two of the most successful characters created by Joe and his cousin Sammy. In other chapters, moreover, Chabon emulates the kind of obscure fan writing that such vintage pop culture inspires. Throughout, the novel also self-consciously evokes the very sheen and atmosphere of 1940s New York through historicizing comments of the narrator, cameo appearances of figures like Salvador Dalí and Orson Welles, and, not least, through descriptions that capture the very energy and buzz of the "Golden

18 Michael Chabon, *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay* (New York: Picador, 2000).

Age" of comic books. One might suggest that this hybridization of genres and this blurring of "high" and "low" are characteristically postmodern strategies, and that the 1940s atmosphere is clearly very carefully and self-consiously constructed. In fact, Hillary Chute suggests that a postmodern historiographical metafiction like E.L. Doctorow's *Ragtime* "[c]learly … is a strong influence on Chabon."[19] I would certainly agree with these arguments, but would immediately add that in contrast with typical postmodern writing these techniques are employed almost seamlessly. That is to say, footnotes in David Foster Wallace, letters combed by the censor in Joseph Heller, lengthy digressions in Pynchon, or emulations of genre fictions in Vonnegut clearly served to disorient and disrupt. In Chabon, by contrast, they rather serve to enhance, in ways reminiscent of the genre of documentary fiction, what Roland Barthes famously called the "reality effect."[20] And so, even if it is to a certain extent postmodern techniques that enable Chabon to emulate the form, style, and tone of various genre fictions, it appears to me that because these techniques are used so seamlessly their primary effect is not to demonstrate a type of postmodern, tongue-in-cheek cleverness, but rather a deliberate and unabashed attempt to fashion for the reader an experience of "entertainment." In fact, I would suggest that Chabon thus returns to "entertainment" in order to move beyond a certain spiral of negativity that postmodernism and indeed the memory of the Holocaust appear to instill. For that reason, it seems to me

19 Hillary Chute, "*Ragtime, Kavalier & Clay*, and the Framing of Comics," *Modern Fiction Studies* 54, no. 2 (Summer 2008): 280, doi: 10.1353/mfs.0.0024.

20 I would be reluctant, however, to label *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay* as a documentary fiction in the same way that, in the field of Holocaust literature, Thomas Keneally's *Schindler's Ark*, John Hersey's *The Wall*, Leon Uris' *Mila 18*, or Anatoli Kuznetsov's *Babi Yar* could be termed documentary fictions. Documentary fictions generally emphasize strongly and repeatedly their own historical accuracy, in the process confirming their fictional—and hence contrived and illusory—nature. *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay* by contrast refrains from making such explicit claims and seems in fact to deliberately court a sense of historical ambiguity with the result that the reader repeatedly wonders if it is possible that fact informs fiction. It seems to me that it is precisely the absence of these claims of historical accuracy and the resultant historical ambiguity that paradoxically enough strengthen the novel's "reality effect." In other words, the illusion of verisimilitude evoked by the novel becomes all the more powerful and enchanting because the text keeps it deliberately unclear whether it at any time offers anything more than just the *semblance* of reality. It is significant in this respect that Chabon has recounted that he has received much mail from readers asking for more historical information concerning the Escapist, or for suggestions on where to buy the original Escapist comic books and art work. Michael Chabon, "Golems I Have Known; Or, Why My Elder Son's Middle Name Is Napoleon: A Trickster's Memoir," in *Maps and Legends*, 221.

that Chabon is at least as closely related to the diverse neo-realisms that emerged in American letters since, roughly, the late 1970s, as to postmodern metafiction.

Pioneered by Raymond Carver, proselytized by Tom Wolfe in a famous manifesto, and spearheaded today by Jonathan Franzen, neo-realism is currently viewed by many scholars concerned with various attempts to move beyond postmodernism as one of the phenomenon's most important symptoms. This return to realism, as Winfried Fluck suggests, "is not just a naive conservative backlash to postmodern daring and innovation, but a new type of writing with its own potential for contributing to our contemporary situation."[21] This new type of realism lacks the "naturalist" pretentions of nineteenth century realism and instead is much permeated itself by a postmodern sense of absence at the core of existence.[22] Still, the new realism emerges precisely to counterbalance the increasingly bloodless and predictable postmodern experimentalism. As Josh Toth sees it, neo-realism "is symptomatic of an epistemic response to postmodernism's inability to do what it claimed to be doing all along. Neo-realism … is, in other words, a response to the futile project of exorcising all spectral, or utopian, remainders." For Toth, neo-realism—as well as renewalism more broadly conceived—"abandons the postmodern *need* to expose, above all else, the impossibility of the specter [of teleology] and instead, works to embrace both the possibility *and* the impossibility of the specter."[23] Hence, neo-realism, like Chabon's entertainment, emerges *within* a postmodern atmosphere yet through its employment of realist strategies it offers the promise, in brackets, of communication and (moral) signification.

What is interesting about the return to realism of authors from Raymond Carver to Jonathan Franzen is that it is indebted both to the

21 Winfried Fluck, "Surface and Depth: Postmodernism and Neo-Realist Fiction," in *Neo-Realism in Contemporary American Fiction*, ed. Kristiaan Versluys (Amsterdam: Rodopi; and Antwerp: Restant, 1992), 67.

22 The work of Raymond Carver is a rather good example. After describing Carver's bleak fictional universe and its drifting, "maimed," characters, Wil Verhoeven points out that Carver "clearly shares the postmodernist dilemma of epistemological and ontological doubt." Significantly, however, Verhoeven hastens to add that "unlike many postmodernists, [Carver] has not entirely given up the quest for meaning. … Characteristically, many of his more successful stories are pregnant with an overwhelming sense of threat, mystery, doubt, while they are yet, ultimately—and especially the latter stories—full of the possibility of life." Wil M. Verhoeven, "What We Talk About When We Talk About Raymond Carver: Or, Much Ado About Minimalism," in *Narrative Turns and Minor Genres in Postmodernism*, eds. Theo D'haen and Hans Bertens (Amsterdam and Atlanta: Rodopi, 1995), 51–52.

23 Toth, *The Passing of Postmodernism*, 117, 118. Italics in original.

great realist tradition as well as to postmodernism, yet it coincides with neither of them. Instead, as Winfried Fluck suggests, it represents "a hybrid—a mixture of modes in which the relations between various narrative strategies are newly negotiated" (79). Significantly, what enables this hybrid to work is what I would term an intrinsically pragmatist effort to reconcile realism's teleological promises of definitive answers with the opposing but equally teleological insistence of postmodernism that such promises in actuality represent false lures and utopias that can never be realized. This effort ultimately depends, as Josh Toth points out, on neo-realism's apparent willingness "to do what postmodernism was not (yet) willing, or able, to do: embrace both realism and metafiction as equally contingent 'language games.'"[24] Such an understanding does not point to the triumph of an already rampant postmodern relativism, but it rather bears witness to the idea that neo-realism and, by extension, Michael Chabon's "entertainment," are in the process of breaking through the postmodern impasse precisely by an effort of "relaxing the rules." To view the narrative strategies of realism and postmodernism as equally contingent is to accept that there is ultimately no mode of representation intrinsically more suitable to representing the human condition than any other. But it also entails the understanding that different narrative strategies have different and potentially complementary uses. Hence, neo-realism and renewalism more broadly are able to negotiate between the strategies of realism and postmodernism and thus to pragmatically put to use their respective advantages in new, complementary, and productive ways. Indeed, neo-realism as well as Chabon's entertainment and escapism function on the basis of a recalibrated, "post-postmodern" understanding of the symbolic order itself, in which the specters of realist and modernist teleology, as well as the abyss of postmodern solipsism may be pragmatically avoided precisely by these highly flexible strategies.

In this light, it is perhaps informative that *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*'s flirtation with genre fiction borrows both from (neo-) realist strategies and from metafictional ones. The point is that in the novel these are not mutually exclusive but complementary strategies: they function neither to foster a wholly naturalized experience of escapism, nor as a deconstruction of the novel's own "escapist" representations. Instead, they complement each other in order to work towards the novel's greater goal of "entertainment," which, it seems, can only occur as a product of the dialectic between a person's desire to connect with others and the ultimate

24 Ibid., 119.

impossibility of this. In fact, Lee Behlman even suggests that "[t]he novel is most vivid and ultimately most convincing in its defense of fantasy not as a device that gives shape to the real but as one that is inevitably, hopelessly, and yet somehow hopefully distant from it."[25] It is also interesting to note here that Chabon himself has emphasized the importance to him of the fact that the sense of connection that literary escapism or entertainment facilitates can never be "real": it is always "a kind of trick, an act of Houdiniesque illusion. When the vision fades and the colored smoke disperses, we are left alone and marooned again in our skulls with nothing but our longing for connection." In fact, it is precisely the ineradicable longing to connect and its impossible consummation of imperfection in which literature finds its origin and its continuing relevance: "[t]hat longing directs writers and readers to seek the high, small window leading out, to lower the makeshift ropes of knotted bedsheet that stories and literature afford, and make a break for it."[26]

Moreover, in *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*, this pragmatist negotiation between the seductions of realist writing and the more disorienting and disruptive effects of postmodernism is personified by Joe as he tries to reconcile his seemingly exclusive emotions of pleasure and love with those of loss and mourning. In fact, it might even be suggested that the ultimate outcome of this process is precisely a form of renewalism: after all, near the end of the novel Joe is able to *renew* his life in America after he has lost his entire family in the Holocaust. But what precedes that point of culmination is an exerting process of working through in which Joe tries to negotiate and finally learns to reconcile his vehement and contradictory emotions surrounding the fact that he has escaped from the Holocaust while his family has not. In fact, there are two important and closely related points to be made here: first, that it is the "entertainment" offered by comic books that plays a pivotal part in this process of working through, and second, that the renewal that is ultimately effectuated is rooted in a compromise of a patently pragmatist nature.

During his first years in America, reading comic books and producing The Escapist offers Joe pleasurable and momentarily satisfying escapes from reality. Still, these feelings of satisfaction are constantly crushed by the frustrating and inescapable fact of his and Sammy's superhero's impotence in the face of actual world events. After the war, however, when

25 Lee Behlman, "The Escapist: Fantasy, Folklore, and the Pleasures of the Comic Book in Recent Jewish American Holocaust Fiction," *Shofar* 22, no. 3 (2004): 70, doi: 10.1353/sho.2004.0048.

26 Chabon, *Manhood for Amateurs*, 266.

Joe is traumatized by his experiences in Antarctica and the knowledge of what happened in the Holocaust, it is comic books and the temporary escapes—the sense of entertainment—they offer that help him survive and work through his traumas. Indeed, at first, reading them "sustained his sanity," and later, back in New York, he finds that his work on an ambitious comic book about the Golem "was helping to heal him."[27] Finally, it is through a shared love of comics that Joe is able to befriend his own son Tommy and in time return to Rosa and to life. A crucial moment here is when he hears from Sammy that Sheldon Anapol wants to sell Empire Comics, the company that made them big more than a decade ago. Much of the money Joe then earned he saved for the time when his family would come to America. "[A]fter the war, the money always felt to him like a debt owed, and unrepayable" (600), but now he decides to buy Empire Comics and to renew his creative partnership with Sammy. At the same time, Joe realizes this is a momentous change in his life: "[h]ope had been his enemy, a frailty that he must at all costs master, for so long now that it was a moment before he was willing to concede that he had let it back into his heart" (604). In short, "entertainment" for Joe facilitates a renewal of life.

Significantly, though, this renewal that Joe manages to accomplish is of a notably pragmatist nature, and depends on his being able to gradually develop a much more sophisticated appreciation of the nature of the escape and the entertainment that comics offer him. Whereas earlier it frustrated Joe that comics were detached from reality, he in time comes to see this as their greatest attraction: "the usual charge leveled against comic books, that they offered *merely an easy escape from reality*, seemed to Joe actually to be a powerful argument on their behalf. … The escape from reality was, he felt—especially right after the war—a worthy challenge" (575, italics in original). Moreover, working on *The Golem* in the face of incredible and irreparable loss, Joe realizes that the value of the escapism offered by comics inheres precisely in its being an *imaginative* force instead of a physical, "real" one, a force that is able in fact to place physical reality at a certain useful—creative, critical, subversive—distance:

> The shaping of a golem, to him, was a gesture of hope, offered against hope, in a time of desperation. It was the expression of a yearning that a few magic words and an artful hand might produce something—one poor, dumb, powerful thing—exempt from the crushing strictures, from the ills, cruelties, and

27 Chabon, *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*, 575, 577. Hereafter cited in the text.

> inevitable failures of the greater Creation. It was the voicing of a vain wish, when you got down to it, to escape. To slip, like the Escapist, free of the entangling chain of reality and the straitjacket of physical laws. (582)

Having come to view the escape and entertainment offered by comic books precisely as an imaginative force, Joe is able to use this power to instill hope, to renew signification, and to restore a sense of perspective. In such a way, Joe's story offers a striking commentary on the quotation attributed to Will Eisner, one of the pioneers of the comics genre, that precedes the novel as one of its two epigraphs: "[w]e have this history of impossible solutions for insoluble problems."[28] Indeed, after endlessly and impossibly negotiating between Europe and America, the past and the future, pain and pleasure, but being unable to settle for one or the other, comics ultimately enable him to resolve these dilemmas pragmatically in the form of an understanding that he does not have to choose any of these things at the cost of the other. That is to say, even if there is no way in which Joe can ever forget the past, let alone make it disappear, he also has learnt to understand that this painful past cannot at the same time prevent him from embracing life, love, and the future.[29] By extension, Chabon seems to suggest that entertainment is valid and valuable not in spite of the Holocaust and the daunting uncertainties of postmodernism, but precisely because of them.

28 The other epigraph is an exclamation from the story "Wakefield" by Nathaniel Hawthorne: "[w]onderful escape!"

29 Even if in *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay* Chabon's entertainment culminates in an eminently hopeful and perhaps somewhat sentimental conclusion, it does not follow that it represents a soft and uncritical substitute for a more hard-hearted postmodernism. As a form of pragmatist "working through," it certainly is future-oriented but at the same time a powerful critical force as well. This more critical dimension of Chabon's entertainment can perhaps best be observed in his novella *The Final Solution* (London, New York, etc.: Harper Perennial, 2006). Outwardly the novella, which takes the form of a Sherlock Holmes story, may appear as an allegory of the Holocaust's impenetrable and unthinkable nature. Yet in a brilliant and extremely perceptive analysis, Stef Craps and Gert Buelens reveal its more "impious" and highly critical implications, demonstrating that "*The Final Solution* breaks with Holocaust piety … through the proliferation of mirroring effects that suggest continuities and parallels between the Third Reich and the European colonial empires and between the plights of their respective victims." Stef Craps and Gert Buelens, "Traumatic Mirrorings: Holocaust and Colonial Trauma in Michael Chabon's *The Final Solution*," *Criticism* 53, no. 4 (Fall 2011): 569, doi: 10.1353/crt.2011.0035.

Embracing the Void: Jonathan Safran Foer

Like *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*, Jonathan Safran Foer's *Everything Is Illuminated* is also much concerned with the possibilities of working through and renewalism in the wake of the Holocaust and postmodernism. In this respect, as its dedication—"simply and impossibly: for my family"—already appears to suggest, Foer's novel is also much invested in a quest for "impossible solutions to insoluble problems." Against a background of the traumas of history and a looming sense of a kind of (postmodern) epistemological and moral paralysis, *Everything Is Illuminated* emphasizes the power of fiction, suggesting that it is precisely through fictional efforts that a powerful sense of meaning and interpersonal communion—indeed a sense of entertainment—may be effected.[30] And in *Everything Is Illuminated* this ambition of working through, of renewalism, is also given shape in highly pragmatist ways, intensely aware of the contingency of the various language games it employs. Strikingly, however, if what "works" for Chabon is a more or less neo-realist application of the tropes of genre fiction, Foer by contrast fully exploits the contents of the postmodern box of tricks.

What emerges time and again as a central animating concern in Foer's *Everything Is Illuminated* is a sense of a void, an insurmountable absence or black hole at the core of existence and history. In fact, a character in Jonathan's history of Trachimbrod notes at one point that "the origin of a story is always an absence," and indeed this understanding is highly appropriate to the novel as a whole.[31] It is the history of the Holocaust that represents the novel's most central and important absence, functioning indeed as its very origin, motivating its various narratives. Thus, it is an absence of memory that prompts Jonathan to travel to Ukraine to find his family's old shtetl, but, additionally, it is also the even more dramatic physical absence that Jonathan and his travel companions encounter there that makes Jonathan write his imaginary history of Trachimbrod. Yet the sense of an absence or a void in fact pervades the novel in a variety of other ways

30 Indeed, the novel often suggests that literature stages, or *is*, a form of *performative ethics*, in which it is not so much the *meaning* of literature, but the *performance* of literature as a symbolic ritual that matters—as in religion. The issue of performativity in *Everything Is Illuminated* is discussed in detail by Katrin Amian in her insightful analysis of Foer's novel. Katrin Amian, *Rethinking Postmodernism(s): Charles S. Peirce and the Pragmatist Negotiations of Thomas Pynchon, Toni Morrison, and Jonathan Safran Foer* (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2008), 174–189.

31 Jonathan Safran Foer, *Everything Is Illuminated* (London: Penguin, 2003), 230. Hereafter cited in the text.

as well. Jonathan's Trachimbrod history, for instance, is much pervaded by a sense of absence, from its very origins in trauma—an accident that may or may not have occurred near the river Brod—to some of the defining experiences in the lives of some of this history's main characters. In fact, this focus on absence is one of the primary ways in which the novel bespeaks a characteristically postmodern sensibility. That is to say, the emphasis on absence underlines in a characteristically postmodern vein the impossibility of *truly* knowing and judging the past, ourselves, and others, and hence the strict impossibility of history, morality, and even of love. Since all those concepts are rooted in absence, as the novel insists, they are ultimately groundless and dependent on constructions and fictions.

Surprisingly, however, the strict impossibility of history, morality, and love after postmodernism does not make the novel dismiss them. On the contrary, it suggests that in the absence of transcendental norms and objective standards, and indeed after the Holocaust, such moral as well as epistemological concerns surface all the more pressingly. Strikingly, however, *Everything Is Illuminated* not only reveals the void, but in response to these pressing concerns it embraces it as well. In a sense both characteristically renewalist as well as eminently pragmatist, the novel seizes upon this idea of absence as justification, precisely, to demonstrate and celebrate the boundless human capacity to create *fictions*. Like Chabon, then, and, as will be seen further in this chapter, like Krauss, Foer thus seems to place himself in the tradition of Scheherazade and *One Thousand and One Nights*. As such, Foer's celebration of fiction-making does not represent a reckless appeal for "anything goes" relativism or even nihilism. On the contrary, the novel suggests that if all our efforts—epistemological, moral, or any other form—to make sense of the world are ultimately fictions and yet the possibilities of creating fictions are endless, then the possibilities of intellectual and moral growth are endless too. Thus, the novel intimates ways in which, in a post-Holocaustal, postmodern context, it is still possible to live with absence, even ways in which it is possible to turn it to one's advantage and to use it as an opportunity. In other words, it suggests that this absence may be worked through pragmatically.

This is best illustrated by the fact that in response to absence and the void, the novel presents itself in many ways as a love story. In fact, love is celebrated by the novel and by many of its central characters as the most important thing in life.[32] Yet love in the novel is also a kind of Holy Grail:

32 Remarkably, no less than six out of twenty-six chapters are entitled "Falling in Love" (or a variation upon that title), while a seventh chapter is called "The First

it is celebrated as life's central aim and purpose, but it can never be truly and fully realized except in pragmatic constructions or even outright fictions. And for that reason, love ever exists in a tense relationship with the absence of love, the impossibility of love, or in short, with the void. For instance, for Yankel and his adopted child Brod, love is something the narrator frequently describes as "simple and impossible"—a key phrase that literally recalls the novel's dedication referred to earlier.

In fact, Yankel, an old man whose wife once left him for another man and who is known in Trachimbrod as the "disgraced usurer," is the first of many characters in Jonathan's chapters to invest in an impossible love. After the famous accident with Trachim's wagon which the baby Brod miraculously survives, Yankel is appointed by lot to become the girl's foster parent. Yet he is unable to tell the girl the truth about her origins in the river as well as the truth about his own sad and shameful life. Instead, he pretends that he is her father and that her mother died in childbirth. All the while, he tells Brod the most wonderful and romantic made-up stories about her mother, and as a result the "inevitable" happens: "Yankel fell in love with his never-wife" (48). Sadly, this never really works; instead of really believing the love letters he writes himself, his actual wife's actual farewell letter keeps returning to him to remind him of his actual past, keeping him "from that most simple and impossible thing: happiness" (49). Yankel's love is literally and impossibly built upon absence: "[h]e would wake from sleep to miss the weight that never depressed the bed next to him, remember in earnest the weight of gestures she never made, long for the un-weight of her un-arm slung over his too real chest, making his widower's remembrances that much more convincing and his pain that much more real" (48–49). It is significant, however, that the impossibility of his love cannot make him stop loving; in fact, it only serves to underline the reality of the sentiment: "[h]e felt that he had lost her. He *had* lost her" (49, italics in original).

Where Yankel finds that he can actually fall in love with an absence, a self-created non-entity, Brod by contrast discovers that she loves neither things nor people and, in short, that she is not in love. This lack of love and her inability to love she experiences as a great absence in her life. In order to make up for it, "she had to satisfy herself with the *idea* of love—loving

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Blasts, and Then Love, 1941." Additionally, one of the implications of the novel's title has to do with the idea presented in one of Jonathan's Trachimbrod chapters that "[f]rom space, astronauts can see people making love as a tiny speck of light. Not light exactly, but a glow that could be mistaken for light—a coital radiance that takes generations to pour like honey through the darkness to the astronaut's eyes" (95). In other words, when "everything is illuminated," there is love and life is perfect.

the loving of things whose existence she didn't care at all about. Love itself became the object of her love. She loved herself in love, she loved loving love, as love loves loving" (80, italics in original). Indeed, painfully aware that she "didn't love life," and that consequently, "[t]here was no convincing reason to live" (81), Brod decides that she must "fake" love to enjoy life. Consequently, in what is an essentially pragmatic gesture, Brod tells herself that "if there is no love in the world, we will make a new world. … Love me, because love doesn't exist, and I have tried everything that does" (82). And so, even though she is convinced that she and her (step)father Yankel do not love each other, "not in the simple and impossible sense of the word" (82), they nonetheless "reciprocated the great and saving lie—that our love for things is greater than our love for our love for things—willfully playing the parts they wrote for themselves, willfully creating and believing fictions necessary for life" (83). Yankel and Brod search for simple and perfect love, but instead they find absence and emptiness. And yet, their encounter with absence and the impossibility of simple and perfect love does not deter them from their efforts to love: though they realize that the "simple and impossible" thing of perfect love is not to be had, they nonetheless cling to a form of love that is not simple and far from perfect. Love emerges without correspondance to any objective or transcendental reality, and yet precisely as a pragmatic fiction it is still important to life, which would otherwise seem meaningless and not worth living.

Later in her life, when Brod is married to the Kolker, her love for him is characterized again by absence: though Brod once thought that she truly loved the Kolker, she discovers after a while that she does not after all. But because the Kolker has not long to live after an accident at the saw mill in which he got a saw blade stuck in his head, Brod agrees to pretend to love her husband for the remainder of his life. Because the saw blade in his head makes the Kolker aggressive and violent, they take different bedrooms, but make a hole in the dividing wall. Separated from each other, they look at each other and talk to each other through this hole, and surprisingly, they experience new forms of intimacy that they had not known before (134). They even make love through the hole:

> The three lovers pressed against one another, but never fully touched. The Kolker kissed the wall, and Brod kissed the wall, but the selfish wall never kissed either back. The Kolker pressed his palms agains the wall, and Brod, who turned her back to the wall to accommodate love, pressed the backs of her thighs against the wall, but the wall remained indifferent, never acknowledging what they were trying to do. (135)

Remarkably, however, this situation does not destroy their love, their lives, or their love life. Instead, "[t]hey lived with the hole. The absence that defined it became a presence that defined them. Life was a small negative space cut out of the eternal solidity, and for the first time, it felt precious" (135). After the death of the Kolker, Brod cuts around the hole in their bedroom wall and puts it on her necklace as a reminder of her husband and "of the hole that she was learning is not the exception in life, but the rule. The hole is no void; the void exists around it" (139).

Interestingly, Brod finds unexpected significance, value, and gratification precisely in her effort to love imperfectly, discovering that it is possible to cut small holes in the void that separates a person from everyone else. This hole allows not so much a full communion between persons, but at least a form of meaningful communication, or "entertainment" in Chabon's sense. In fact, it appears near the end of the novel that she even managed to live with absence and enjoy her imperfect love without the pretense of the physical hole in the wall separating her bedroom from that of her husband's. As the Dial, the bronzed body of the Kolker, tells Jonathan's grandfather Safran a century and a half later, he and Brod actually did *not* keep separate rooms:

> *every night she'd come to be with me. … Every morning, she'd clean me of my excrement, bathe me, dress me, and see that my hair was combed like a sane man's, even when it meant an elbow to the nose or a broken rib. She polished the blade. She wore my teeth on her body like other wives might wear jewelry. The hole didn't matter. We paid it no attention. We shared a room. She was with me. She did all of those things and so many more, things I would never tell anyone, and she never even loved me. Now that's love.* (264, italics in original)

In this way and others the novel even suggests that love that is imperfect is actually more valuable, meaningful, and ethical than the "simple and impossible" variety, not because it is actually more perfect than perfect love, but rather because of the effort that needs to be put into it—an effort, moreover, that is ultimately bound to "fail." Indeed, the effort to attain love—or happiness, meaning, morality—can never be achieved indefinitely and absolutely, but can come about only *pragmatically*, that is, in necessarily finite and imperfect practice, in a continuous process of dealing with a void. Precisely this point is wonderfully explained by John Dewey when he writes that "[w]e long, amid a troubled world, for perfect being. We forget that what gives meaning to the notion of perfection is the events that create longing, and that, apart from them, a 'perfect' world would

mean just an unchanging brute existential thing."[33] Or, in the more oracular words of the Dial to Safran, "every love is carved from loss. Mine was. Yours is. Your great-great-great-grandchildren's will be. But we learn to live in that love" (266).

Significantly, the pragmatic effort of carving a love from loss is at the same time also essentially a fictive effort that does not so much unveil meaning where it lays hidden, but creates it where there was none. Yankel, for instance, unable to tell Brod the truth about her background, tries to protect her by "[inventing] stories so fantastic that she had to believe" (77). Later, it is not so much their profound love and understanding of each other that enable Yankel and Brod live together harmoniously and lovingly, but, as we have seen, precisely their willingness to create and believe the "fictions necessary for life" (83). Likewise, the marriage of Brod and the Kolker becomes the most meaningful and precious from the moment they decide to live their love as a fiction—that is to say, when Brod realizes she does not love the Kolker but nonetheless agrees to *pretend* to love him.

In a large variety of ways, then, *Everything Is Illuminated* emphasizes that romantic and family relations as well as love itself are patently imaginary or "fictional." But surprisingly, the novel also suggests that from this characteristically postmodern and potentially relativistic understanding of love also emerges a renewed moral understanding. As Katrin Amian suggests, Foer's novel demonstrates a characteristically renewalist desire "to have it both ways: to embrace the liberating potential of a radical postmodernist uncertainty on the one hand, and to reclaim meaningful (inter)subjectivities on the other and to explore new ways of conceptualizing 'agency,' 'meaning,' and 'truth' in a post-postmodern age."[34] A striking illustration of this philosophical orientation is offered by the story of the "Wisps of Ardisht," to whom Jonathan at several points in his chapters casually refers to. These Wisps of Ardisht are "a clan of artisan smokers in Rovno who smoked so much they smoked even when they were not smoking, and were condemned by shtetl proclamation to a life of rooftops as shingle layers and chimney sweeps" (16). Soon after their exile, the Wisps of Ardisht fear running out of matches to light their cigarettes and get into a panic. With only one match left, however, "a grand idea emerged … : simply make sure that there is always someone smoking. Each cigarette can be lit from the previous one. As long as there is a lit cigarette, there

33 John Dewey, *Experience and Nature*, 2nd ed. (New York: Dover, 1958), 63.
34 Amian, *Rethinking Postmodernism(s)*, 188.

is the promise of another. The glowing ash end is the seed of continuity! … The sky was always lit with at least one cigarette, the candle of hope" (136–137). The precise identity of these characters, as well as their relevance to the novel as a whole remains largely indeterminate, though their presence in any case serves in creating the kind of mythological, magical realist atmosphere that informs the chapters about Trachimbrod. What I would like to suggest, though, is that the story of the Wisps may be seen as an allegory about a world that has lost its traditional external, objective, and absolute grounding, and which, on the brink of collapse, finds a new means of existence—in fact, of illumination—that is non-absolute, grounded in sheer pragmatic and human ingenuity, rather than external factors. In these allegorical terms, the story of the Wisps of Ardisht echoes some of the most significant themes in Foer's novel.

Although this new moral and philosophical understanding pervades the novel on all levels, its workings may be addressed most effectively by concentrating on that part of the novel which I have hardly addressed yet in this study: Alex's letters to Jonathan which precede every one of his chapters except the first one. These letters appear as part of a correspondence between Alex and Jonathan in which they reflect on their trip through Ukraine and inform each other of what is happening in their lives. Most importantly, however, they use these letters to comment at length on each other's writing, motivate their choices, and suggest excisions, changes, and additions. As such, these letters obviously are a powerful metafictional device that highlight the constructed and fictional nature of Jonathan's fictionalized history of Trachimbrod *as well as* Alex's ostensibly factual report of his, Jonathan, and Grandfather's trip to Trachimbrod. In a way that might already be termed renewalist, Alex's letters thus draw attention to the contingency of the very different "language games" that Jonathan and Alex respectively enjoy. Much more interestingly, however, Alex's metafictional reflections also emphatically draw attention to the pragmatic as well as *moral* consequences of negotiating between competing but equally contingent language games. In such a way, as Amian puts it, they demonstrate "how 'meaningful' (inter)subjectivities might be reclaimed through the very workings of a postmodernist textuality."[35]

Reading Jonathan's chapters and writing his own, Alex soon realizes that truth is a highly relative concept and, more importantly even, that this endows the writer with considerable moral responsibility. As he sees it, a writer is in the unique position of straightening out (historical) wrongs and

35 Ibid., 174.

of literally making the world a better place. Indeed, he feels that "[*w*]*ith writing, we have second chances*" (144, italics in original[36]), and from that perspective, he would very much like to give history and in particular his grandfather a second chance. Of course, the dramatic climax of the novel is the great moment of "illumination" when Grandfather confesses being implicated in the death at the hands of the Nazis of his best friend Herschel. Yet at one point preceding that denouement, Alex makes the urgent suggestion to Jonathan that this history might be changed: [*y*]*ou could alter it, Jonathan. For him, not for me. Your novel is now verging on the war. It is possible*" (145). At the end of the letter he repeats his suggestion: "*Grandfather is not a bad person, Jonathan. Everyone performs bad actions. I do. Father does. Even you do. A bad person is someone who does not lament his actions. Grandfather is now dying because of his. I beseech you to forgive us, and to make us better than we are. Make us good*" (145). It seems to me that Alex's point is not so much that he wants to smooth over the traumatic past and his grandfather's role in it, but rather that Grandfather's history might be changed and made prettier by the same logic that allows Jonathan to write a history of Trachimbrod in the most radically imaginative terms. In fact, Alex is highly sensitive to the ethical dilemmas involved in his and Jonathan's collaborative writing effort. As he points out to Jonathan in his next letter:

> [*w*]*e are being very nomadic with the truth, yes? The both of us? Do you think that this is acceptable when we are writing about things that occurred? If your answer is no, then why do you write about Trachimbrod and your grandfather in the manner that you do, and why do you command me to be untruthful? If your answer is yes, then this creates another question, which is if we are able to be such nomads with the truth, why do we not make the story more premium than life?* (179)

Among other things, Alex suggests that since they are writing fiction they could turn their trip to Trachimbrod into a great success, Brod could be made happy, and Jonathan's grandfather Safran could be less outrageous a character. In such a way, everything "*could be perfect and beautiful, and funny, and usefully sad, as you say. … I do not think that there are any limits to how excellent we could make life seem*." (179–180).

Alex is certainly right in pointing out that both Jonathan and himself are "nomadic with the truth," and that both are writing fictions. Yet Alex

36 All of Alex's letters to Jonathan are printed in italics. In subsequent quotations, therefore, use of italics in original will not be indicated in the text.

fails to understand that the of necessity wholly imagined history of Trachimbrod that concerns Jonathan and his own account of the well-remembered and well-documented trip to Trachimbrod and especially of Grandfather's first-hand testimony are situated on a different epistemological level and that consequently they cannot be represented and "tampered with" in the same way. Moreover, Alex misunderstands the nature or the function of his and Jonathan's collaborative novel as a response to the Holocaust. In his last letter to Jonathan, Alex is extremely angry with Jonathan for making impossible the love of Safran and the Gypsy girl. "*I could hate you! … We have such chances to do good, and yet again and again you insist on evil*" (240). Indeed, Alex accuses Jonathan of cowardice: "[*y*]*ou are a coward for the same explanation that Brod is a coward, and Yankel is a coward, and Safran is a coward—all of your relatives are cowards. You are all cowards because you live in a world that is 'once-removed,' if I may excerpt you*" (240). Like Chabon's Joe Kavalier, Alex desires fiction to offer an escape from reality through its ability to make life seem more "excellent." But in such a way, he misses the point that both his own narrative and Jonathan's—in fact, Foer's novel as such—are concerned not with escaping but with attempting to openly face absence and trauma. In an unexpected manner, Alex's desire to escape from history through literature echoes the old argument that fiction about the Holocaust would distract and lead away from the unrepresentable. For many traditional critics, this was a reason to dismiss Holocaust fiction; for Alex, by contrast, it is precisely fiction's attraction. Yet this view fails to appreciate the paradoxical complexity of fiction: by operating on the level of the symbolic order, fiction *does* operate on the basis of a certain distance between itself and brute, unmediated reality—indeed a form of escape; but it is precisely that distance that allows fiction to *relate* to reality and make sense of it. In other words, it is this distance that enables the possibility of working through.

Indeed, though *Everything Is Illuminated* uses a very different approach than *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*, it, too, functions as a way of exploring the possibilities of working through: after all, in the larger context of Foer's novel, Alex's reflections draw attention precisely to the fact that even after postmodernism, there certainly still are moral consequences to viewing the world in terms of one or another contingent language game. As Katrin Amian points out, "this new sense of an ethical urgency" that the novel thus evokes "remains mediated, however, and never ceases to openly parade its own mediated quality." Yet the effect of this is "an intriguing interplay of oscillating textual in/stability through which

'stability'—like 'the subject'—is exposed as nothing more than a textual effect and is yet shown to perform a relevant function as a dynamic category within a dynamic process of signification."[37] Taking second chances in stories and fiction, then, is a way of insisting that, despite the unavoidability of trauma and history, a sense of morality and the hope for a better human future are still possible and necessary. At the same time, these sentiments are profoundly problematized since Alex's comments do not stand alone. Rather, they function within a highly self-conscious postmodern textual game which, by emphasizing the contingent nature of narrative, lays bare precisely the enormous difficulty of morality and hope after the Holocaust and postmodernism.

And yet, despite these difficulties, there is a kind of measurable pragmatic success to be identified that justifies the sense of hope against hope *Everything Is Illuminated* seems to espouse. Though neither Alex nor Jonathan can ultimately give second chances to the past and change it, they *can* change their own present and future. Indeed, Alex's strictly editorial concerns become ever more closely intertwined with his "real-life" concerns as the collaborative effort of writing the novel with Jonathan advances. In fact, reading Jonathan's chapters, writing his own, and thinking about both of them enable Alex to reach a sense of inter-subjective communion and responsibility, ultimately leading him to make choices with actual and far-reaching consequences. In the process, moreover, Alex's literary reflections offer a compelling exploration and reassertion of the (moral) significance and even power of literature after postmodernism. Crucially, this is not to naively suggest that literature in Alex's letters emerges as a physical force that might change real lives as much as it did Alex's; by contrast, what Alex's letters seem to bear witness to is the power of literature precisely as an *imaginative* force.

Whereas Alex in his own chapters presents himself with blustering self-confidence, he assumes a much more "guileless" and confessional tone of voice in his letters to Jonathan, expressing uncertainty about himself as well as about his and Jonathan's respective writings. Halfway through the novel, Alex's uncertainty about himself does not disappear—in fact he intimates that he is struggling severely with homosexual feelings—but he does express ever greater appreciation for the literary collaboration he and Jonathan are involved in: not only does he begin to comprehend and value Jonathan's writing, but he also attaches great significance to the effort of writing collaboratively. At one point, Alex tells Jonathan he has "*learned*

37 Amian, *Rethinking Postmodernism(s)*, 178.

many momentous lessons from your writing" (178), and it seems that one of these lessons is that fiction offers ways of communication and ways of understanding oneself and others that are not available by other means. As Alex points out to Jonathan at one point, "[*w*]*ith our writing, we are reminding each other of things. We are making one story, yes?*" (144). The idea of "making one story" together is important to Alex because it seems to answer to a strong desire he feels to communicate: "*I want to inform you about what it is like to be me, which is a thing you still do not possess a single whisper of. Perhaps when you read the next division of my story, you will comprehend*" (178). And in his next letter to Jonathan, Alex suggests that he and Jonathan through their writing have indeed reached the sense of "entertainment" that Alex had been looking for. In this letter, Alex suggests that they skip their usual editorial exchanges and refrain from praising or criticizing each other because they "*are outside of that already*" (214). Instead, Alex writes,

> [*w*]*e are talking now, Jonathan, together, and not apart. We are with each other, working on the same story, and I am certain that you can also feel it. Do you know that I am the Gypsy girl and you are Safran, and that I am the Kolker and you are Brod, and that I am your grandmother and you are Grandfather, and that I am Alex and you are you, and that I am you and you are me? Do you not comprehend that we can bring each other safety and peace?* (214)

Remarkably, Alex and Jonathan's mutual investment in fiction—in constructing realities that are patently unreal—are instrumental in creating a sense of communication, whose significance is urgent and moral precisely because it is imaginary. That is to say, the moral value of Alex and Jonathan's writing lies not in its strict obedience to representing things as they irrevocably are, but in its capability of imagining things how they might (not) have been. Ultimately, the resultant feelings of (imaginative) communion and responsibility nonetheless result in taking real, practical steps for the future. In the novel's final chapter, a letter to Jonathan written by Alex's grandfather just before his death, Grandfather tells how Alex finally took steps against his abusive father by kicking him out of the house. For Grandfather, this is a sign that a new beginning has been made after a long family history of trauma, and he commits suicide in full happiness, knowing that he is merely finishing what Alex has started (275). Interestingly enough, Grandfather's report of Alex's action against his father is a verbatim rendition of a passage in Jonathan's earliest draft of his novel, which Alex read months earlier when they were still in Trachimbrod: a

self-referential and therefore patently contrived and fictional yet nonetheless hopeful testimony to the lasting moral force of literature.

Such testimony to the lasting moral force of literature does not so much bear witness to moral growth as an actual, quantifiable reality, but rather as a continuing *possibility*. Indeed, the (moral) significance of Foer's novel is not that that it would actually, physically make the world a better and more moral place, but rather that it explores ways in which values such as love, friendship, identity, history, etcetera, might still mean something even after the Holocaust and even after postmodernism. Of course, to accept *Everything Is Illuminated*'s suggestions as worthwhile, significant, and valuable, depends upon a certain "will to believe," as William James would call it: to wilfully embrace and believe in such values while knowing that one's faith in them lacks any "objective" grounds.[38] At the same time, though, this kind of hopefulness is not simply the youthful naiveté of a young writer: it is precisely a renewed faith in, or even a willingness to take a gamble upon, the "impossible possibility" of moral significance and communication that characterizes the many contemporary efforts to move beyond postmodernism.

Literature as a Symbolic Salvage Operation: Nicole Krauss

Such a distinct faith in the moral and communicative powers of literature emerges even more prominently in Nicole Krauss's *The History of Love* and *Great House*. Each of these novels embarks upon a kind of literary salvage operation: in various ways, they both explore and emphasize the persistence of literature and fiction despite a sense of postmodern groundlessness, interpersonal alienation, or even individual isolation, and despite the destruction and traumas of history—in particular the Holocaust. In fact, both novels in different but nonetheless eminently hopeful ways suggest that fiction is able to forge interpersonal and moral connections whose strength lies precisely in the fact that they are fictive.

In chapters 3 and 5, I have read Krauss's *The History of Love* as a novel of memory and identity, yet here I would like to suggest that it is also an extended meditation on loss, love, and literature. More concretely, I will argue that the novel is a celebration of the power of fiction to salvage or even redeem love in a world marked by postmodern entropy. "Love" in this context is understood both narrowly, that is, in a romantic sense, as

38 On Foer's novel and how it invites a pragmatist "will to believe," see also Katrin Amian, *Rethinking Postmodernism(s)*, 191–197.

well as more broadly in the sense of Chabon's "entertainment"—a form of intersubjective communication. In this way, *The History of Love* seems to clearly embrace a renewalist agenda, which is pursued moreover in close relationship to the memory of the Holocaust, as well as in a formal sense by means of characteristically postmodern techniques. Indeed, through the use of multiple and eccentric voices as well as intricate and increasingly self-referential plotting, Krauss's novel depicts how an obscure novel entitled *The History of Love*, written in Poland before the Holocaust by Leo Gursky, one of the Krauss's novel's central characters, against all odds survives the Holocaust to come back to its original author more than fifty years later. More precisely, Krauss's novel traces how *The History of Love* in this process is instrumental in connecting scattered people and bringing their lives into unexpected significance. In a metaphorical sense, then, Krauss's novel illuminates how the Holocaust was unable to destroy neither literature nor its communicative ambitions, and indeed that precisely in and through literature it is possible to stage a salvage operation of (moral) significations that seemed lost or impossible in a post-Holocaust, postmodern world.

The principle characters in Krauss's *The History of Love* all suffer from the consequences of loss. The young Alma and her brother Bird have lost their father, creating an emptiness in their lives that their mother, herself steeped in mourning, is unable to fill. The losses of Zvi Litvinoff and Leo Gursky, boyhood friends in Poland and both survivors of the Holocaust are even more dramatic. Litvinoff, who managed to escape from Poland before the onset of the Holocaust, lost his family and friends and his home, as, in fact, did Gursky. Yet in addition, Gursky also lost Alma, the love of his life, and his son Isaac: Alma also managed to escape from Poland before the arrival of the Nazis, but expecting a child and fearing that Gursky would not survive the war, she decided to marry another man. Finally, Gursky also lost his novel *The History of Love*, which he had given to Litvinoff for safekeeping but, as far as Gursky knows, had got lost in a flood. And so, as Gursky puts it in one of his interior monologues, "I lost *Mameh*. … I lost Fritzy. … I lost Sari and Hanna to the dogs. I lost Herschel to the rain. I lost Josef to a crack in time. I lost the sound of laughter. I lost a pair of shoes. … I lost the only woman I ever wanted to love. I lost years. I lost books. I lost the house where I was born. And I lost Isaac."[39] Concerned as *The History of Love* is with its characters' feelings of loss, however, it also cautiously suggests ways in which their losses are to a certain extent "redeemed"

39 Nicole Krauss, *History of Love* (London: Penguin, 2006), 269. Hereafter cited in the text.

through love and by means of literature. Thus, the novel sets in motion a process of working through that is imaginatively completed by the reader.

In this process, a key role is fulfilled by Gursky's (and/or Litvinoff's) novel *The History of Love*, which figures in each of the main storylines of Krauss's novel. Written in a dreamy style somewhat reminiscent perhaps of Borges (as the reader finds out through excerpts included in Alma's chapters and Litvinoff's), Gursky's novel not surprisingly is a novel that is intensely about love. Yet it is also very much a novel *of* love: it was written in pre-war Poland for the girl Gursky loved and indeed about the girl he loved. After he had failed to please her with two previous literary works in which he wrote about other things, he decided in his third work to "[write] about the only thing I knew. The pages piled up. Even after the only person whose opinion I cared about left on a boat for America, I continued to fill pages with her name" (12). As it turns out, Gursky wrote a novel in which every girl was called Alma, later allowing Alma Singer to explain to people that her "mother named [her] after every girl in a book [her] father gave her called *The History of Love*" (52). Of course, as a result of the Holocaust, Gursky lost *The History of Love*, as he lost everything else in his life. Yet as it turns out, it did not really get lost after all. In fact, one day in New York, more than a lifetime later, Gursky is stunned to find that his novel has miraculously been returned to him through the mail. Strangely though, his original Yiddish has become English, his characters have gotten Spanish names, and the novel's setting has been changed from Eastern Europe to South America. How this is possible Gursky will never find out, but through the other strands of Krauss's novel the reader is gradually able to reconstruct what happened. In a sense, it is by tracing the unlikely fate of Gursky's novel of love that Krauss's novel celebrates the survival of literature (and love) after the Holocaust.

Before looking in some more detail at the story of the survival of Gursky's novel, it is important to emphasize, however, that Krauss's novel does not celebrate literature's survival for the sake of literature itself. What is significant about literature's survival in *The History of Love* is not so much the persistence of literary writing itself, but the persistence rather of literature's capacity to imaginatively engage scattered and isolated people and to forge meaningful connections between their lives. In fact, Krauss boldly suggests that in doing so literature not only survives, but that it saves and salvages. For instance, one day back in Poland, Litvinoff visits his friend Gursky in his apartment and finds him extremely ill. Litvinoff decides to stay with his friend while he is sleeping, and while waiting he reads a pile of literary obituaries of great writers that lie on Gursky's desk.

After first reading Gursky's obituary of Isaac Babel, he is extremely angry: Litvinoff is a professional obituary writer and he resents his friend for intruding upon his field. On a second reading, however, his anger makes way for a sense of awe at the power of Gursky's writing and sadness about his own mediocrity. On the bottom of the pile, he finds an obituary that Gursky has written for himself:

> [Litvinoff] started to read. When he got to the end he shook his head and read it again. And again after that. He read it over and over, mouthing the words as if they were not an announcement of death, but a prayer for life. As if by just saying them, he could keep his friend from the angel of death, the force of his breath alone keeping its wings pinned for a moment more, a moment more—until it gave up and left his friend alone. (187)

Like a modern Scheherazade, Litvinoff stays with Gursky all night, reading his friend's obituary again and again. The next morning he is relieved to see that the color has returned to his friend's face and that he is recovering. Only then does Litvinoff fold up and put away the obituary. However, "for the rest of his life he carried in his breast pocket the page he'd protected all night from becoming real, so that he could buy a little more time—for his friend, for life" (188). It is perhaps significant that this instance of a very physical, pseudo-magical act of "saving a life" through literature takes place before the Holocaust. Still, by tracing the history of Gursky's novel, Krauss suggests how literature survives as a meaningful and valuable force even after the Holocaust—or perhaps even precisely after the Holocaust.

During the war, Zvi Litvinoff is able to escape Poland and travel to Chile. But before his departure, Gursky entrusts him with an envelope containing the manuscript of a novel called *The History of Love*. After Litvinoff learns of the fate of the Jews in the Holocaust, he is sure that his friend has not survived, and at a certain point, he decides to translate his friend's novel and publish it under his own name. On the surface this may seem a perverse act of plagiarism and blatant betrayal. On closer inspection, however, it is also a deeply troubled act of love. In the first place, it strongly appears that he does it to win the love of a woman called Rosa.[40]

40 Litvinoff only digs up Gursky's manuscript the evening after he has kissed Rosa for the first time and afterwards becomes afraid that it would be impossible that he would be permitted the happiness of being loved by a wonderful young woman (253–254). In a further chapter, the narrator notes that the day Litvinoff started plagiarizing Gursky's novel, he did not consciously think that "[i]f she thinks I wrote this, she will love me" (292). Thus the narrator strengthens the thought that this was in fact an unconscious motivation.

More significantly, however, plagiarizing Gursky's novel also represents a highly convoluted way of memorializing his friend Leo, Alma, and their love. Litvinoff starts his plagiarism by first copying in his own hand Gursky's Yiddish manuscript, changing only the names and locations. Yet when he encounters the name of Alma, he finds himself physically unable to change that name into Rosa: "perhaps it was because he was the only person, aside from its true author, to have read *The History of Love* and known the real Alma" (293). Or "perhaps it was because he knew that to remove her name would be like erasing all the punctuation, and the vowels, and every adjective and noun. Because without Alma, there would have been no book" (294). After Litvinoff has translated the novel into Spanish, with the help of Rosa, and the novel has been accepted for publication, Litvinoff agrees to make some changes in the text that have been requested by his editor. Desperate because of a guilty conscience and "not knowing what else to do, that night he also made one change the editor hadn't asked for" (301): he takes out of his breast pocket the piece of paper he had been carrying with him for years, translates its contents, and adds it as the last chapter to his text. This last chapter's title is, of course, THE DEATH OF LEOPOLD GURSKY. And so, on the day that "Litvinoff died quietly in his bed bathed in sunlight, he didn't take his secret with him. Or not entirely. All anyone had to do was turn to the last page, and there they would find, spelled out in black and white, the name of the true author of *The History of Love*" (302). And so, the ultimate published version of Litvinoff's plagiarized novel may be "a copy of a copy of a copy of a copy of the original" (177), but as such it is also a deeply ambiguous and paradoxical act of memorialization and mourning. Indeed, Litvinoff's work is a literary palimpsest through which Gursky and Alma, their love, and by extension, the "vanished world" that gave birth to them are made to survive in a symbolic sense.

By adding to his plagiarized novel Gursky's obituary, which he had once read over and over again in order to ward off Gursky's death, Litvinoff tries to redeem both his friend and his own betrayal. It is indeed a desparate act, because knowing what Litvinoff knows (or thinks he knows), the obituary can neither undo his plagiarism nor can it bring back his friend. And yet precisely in its desperateness it is also a small act of love and grace: an instance of trying to redeem the world, knowing that it cannot be done except in fiction, and therefore doing it anyway. Significantly, Krauss's novel also concludes in a highly postmodern, self-referential vein with THE DEATH OF LEOPOLD GURSKY, thereby performatively reenacting this small act of grace. In fact, throughout the entire novel, Krauss is determined to

locate such small instances of love and grace, even in places where on the surface there appears to be only loss, destruction, or even betrayal. Leo Gursky, for instance, remembers that the moment that the Nazi *Einsatzgruppen*, or killing squads, entered his shtetl, he "happened to be lying on his back in the woods thinking about the girl. You could say it was his love for her that saved him" (18). Also, near the end of the novel, Gursky recalls how he once hid from the Germans in a potato cellar, the entrance of which was poorly hidden by some hay. Two SS men came and he was very close to being found, but instead they were too busy talking: one of them told the other he feared his wife was cheating on him. Distracted by their conversation, they failed to exercise their usual thoroughness and consequently to find Gursky. And so,

> [b]ecause of that wife who got tired of waiting for her soldier, I lived. … [I]f he hadn't had so much on his mind I'd have been found . … [I]t's like some tiny nothing that sets off a natural disaster halfway across the world, only this was the opposite of disaster, how by accident she saved me with that thoughtless act of grace, and she never knew, and how that, too, is part of the history of love. (371).

And indeed, the novel suggests that no matter how small and insignificant these instances of love and grace may be, they are cause for hope, because they may again set in motion a "butterfly effect" from which might result other small instances of grace and thus ultimately a much larger good. Strikingly, a considerable role is fulfilled in this process by fiction and literature, which can be illustrated best by focusing on the story of Alma Singer.

Of course, Alma was named after every girl in a novel called *The History of Love*, written, as far as she knows, by Zvi Litvinoff. Her father had once bought a copy of this novel in Buenos Aires, and he loved it so much that he had it given it to Alma's mother only two weeks after they had first met, even though he knew that she did not know Spanish (172). And so, among the modest print run of Litvinoff's plagiarized novel, "at least one copy was destined to change a life—more than one life" (111). Later, when Leo Gursky finally meets Alma Singer at the very close of the novel, he is moved and overjoyed to realize "that in some small way it was my love that named her" (384). In such ways, Krauss emphasizes that literature still has unexpected value, even when embodied in an act of plagiarism, but not so much in a Romantic sense as a force of truth, or in a more aesthetical sense as a force of beauty, but precisely as a creative, life-giving force, and, moreover, as a force of "entertainment." In short, then, through creating the character Alma, Krauss's novel offers a renewalist vindication

of imaginative writing and, at the same time, rebuts the (in)famous notion that literature after the Holocaust is "barbaric."

At the same time, Alma is not just a passive container for Krauss's hopeful and renewalist fantasies. In fact, she plays an active and decisive part herself in putting into effect the novel's renewalist agenda. When Alma's mother is asked by a man called Jacob Marcus to translate *The History of Love*, Alma decides to interfere in her mother's correspondence in order to set her up romantically with this mysterious gentleman. In the process, Alma sets out on a search for more information about the background of the novel that named her which ultimately develops into a full-blown quest for identity. During her research, she discovers that the Alma she is named after was a real person called Alma Mereminski. Moreover, she also discovers that *The History of Love*—and therefore, she too—is closely related to the history of the Holocaust. In fact, it is mainly through her efforts—and with some unexpected help of her brother Bird—that the novel is able to meaningfully connect, intertwine, and indeed, "entertain" the various lives and histories the novel is concerned with and which had been violently separated as a result of the Holocaust.

After Alma finds out that Alma Mereminski was real, a number of significant events occur in rapid succession, demanding a condensed summary at this point. As Alma is able to establish, Alma Mereminski actually ended up in New York where she married a certain Mordecai Moritz. Their eldest son, who, as the reader knows, is actually Leo Gursky's son, is called Isaac Moritz. He is a famous writer and Alma finds out that he wrote a novel in which the protagonist is named Jacob Marcus. Alma decides to visit Isaac at his home, leaving him a brief note and her phone number after he does not answer the door. By this time, the reader has already learned from Gursky's chapters that Isaac has died. However, Isaac's half-brother Bernard finds Alma's note, dials her phone number and explains the situation to Alma's brother Bird who answers the phone: Isaac had found letters through which he discovered that his real father was a man who wrote a novel called *The History of Love*, called—not Zvi Litvinoff, as Bird is surprised to find out—but Leopold Gursky. Connecting this new information to some wildly off the mark extrapolations he had drawn from reading Alma's notebooks, Bird completely misinterprets the situation and believes that Leopold Gurksy must be Alma's father. For reasons that he does not quite understand himself and that do not really make sense, except that they stem from some inchoate desire to do something good, Bird decides to print his mother's translation of *The History of Love* and to deliver it to Leo Gursky, whose address he is able to find in the phone book. Next,

he sends both Alma and Gursky a note inviting them to meet up in Central Park at a set time.

The novel's last chapter recounts through alternating voices Alma and Gursky's meeting in the park. Here, everything "comes together" and a sense of "redemption" and catharsis is finally effectuated. When Alma introduces herself, Gursky at first thinks he is experiencing a kind of vision and that his love has returned to him as an angel, "[s]talled at the age when she loved you most" (373). Gursky and Alma are at first confused, but soon they both understand who they are really looking at. Indeed, Gursky reflects, "[w]hat if the things I believed were possible were really impossible, and the things I believed were impossible were really not? For example. What if the girl sitting next to me on this bench was real? What if she was named Alma, after my Alma? What if my book hadn't been lost in a flood at all?" (380–381). In her turn, Alma realizes "that I'd been searching for the wrong person" (383), and that Gursky is the man who once loved Alma Mereminski and fathered a son called Isaac Moritz, and thinks that the latter never knew of his existence. At the moment she wants to tell him that his son Isaac *did* find out about Gursky being his real father shortly before he died, Gursky is overcome with emotions. Instead, they embrace and Gursky says her name. On the next page, "THE DEATH OF LEOPOLD GURSKY" is appended and the novel ends.

With this climactic ending, the various strands in *The History of Love* are brought together and a sense of working through and restoration is effectuated. This is not to say, however, that the various traumas and losses that lie at the heart of the novel are hereby fully redeemed and resolved. Rather, the novel suggests that it is precisely through literature and the imaginative investment required by literature that new possibilities of meaning and unexpected connections and relationships emerge. In Krauss's novel, this clearly is a cause for hope: here, literature is celebrated as an imaginative force that connects isolated individuals and brings their experience into wider inter-subjective significance, thus imaginatively establishing a meaningful and moral order. Yet at the same time the novel also emphasizes the extremely fragile nature of the order it purports to erect. The denouement and sense of catharsis effected in the final chapter, for instance, depends upon a highly unlikely and erratic intervention by Bird. In other words, if *The History of Love* offers a restoration of faith—in literature, in love, in meaning, in morality—it offers neither definitive certainties nor a roadmap to a new promised land. What it really offers is the possibility of all these treasured things as what is at stake in the ongoing gamble that is life. Indeed, its restoration of faith is

inherently pragmatic, suggesting that even if love, meaning, and morality can only truly exist in fiction, one has nothing to lose and the world to win by striving for them.

This pragmatic capacity of literature to (re)construct meaningful connections between histories and people, to forge or restore meaningful and moral order, and to work through losses in ways that are valuable precisely because they are imaginative is explored further and with even greater complexity in Krauss's *Great House*. In this respect, the novel's title is highly instructive. As Mr. Weisz, one of the novel's central characters, explains at one point, the term "Great House" refers to the school of Jewish learning founded by Yochanan ben Zakkai after the Romans sacked the Temple in Jerusalem. Ben Zakkai realized that the loss of Jerusalem and the Temple demanded a radical rethinking of Jewish religion and nationhood. Therefore, he taught that instead of making sacrifices to God in the Temple, which had become impossible, Jews would now pray to God and collect and study his laws. Thus, ben Zakkai laid the basis of what would eventually become Rabbinic Judaism. And as his disciples began to realize only after his death, what explained the very power and attraction of ben Zakkai's lesson was that it offered a way of defying or "working through" the traumatic condition of Diaspora by exhorting Jews to "[t]urn Jerusalem into an idea. Turn the Temple into a book, a book as vast and holy and intricate as the city itself. Bend a people around the shape of what they lost, and let everything mirror its absent form. Later his school became known as the Great House."[41] In this way, as Weisz had been taught by his father, the story of the Great House is in fact the story of the Jewish people. Two thousand years after the destruction of the Temple, "every Jewish soul is built around the house that burned in that fire, so vast that we can, each one of us, only recall the tiniest fragment. … But if every Jewish memory were put together, every last holy fragment joined up again as one, the House would be built again, … or rather a memory of the House so perfect that it would be, in essence, the original itself" (279). It is through the story of the Great House that Weisz, a dealer in antique furniture and himself the survivor of another "great fire," namely the Holocaust, seeks to make sense of his life and identity.[42] Taking quite literally

41 Nicole Krauss, *Great House* (New York and London: Norton, 2010), 279. Hereafter cited in the text.

42 Indeed, the fact that the Great House story evokes not only the destruction of the Temple, but through Weisz's telling of it, also the Holocaust is significant: in some Jewish circles, "churban," the Hebrew word for the destruction of the second temple, is used to denote the Holocaust. James E. Young, *Writing and Rewriting the*

his father's lesson that "[w]e live, each of us, to preserve our fragment, in a state of perpetual regret and longing for a place we only know existed because we remember a keyhole, a tile, the way the threshold was worn under an open door" (279), Weisz has made a career out of retrieving cherished pieces of furniture lost during World War II. In fact, this is not just a professional interest: Weisz has devoted his life to retrieving the furniture that once stood in his family's home in Budapest. More specifically, he has obsessively been reassembling original pieces from all over the world in order to create a perfect reincarnation of his father's study in his home in Jerusalem. The only thing missing from this dream is his father's desk.

Weisz's story of the Great House not only renders his own obsessive desires for lost furniture meaningful, but it also presents Krauss's novel's with its key operating trope. Indeed, the novel is centrally concerned with creating "Great Houses," that is, with the possibilities of (symbolically) reconstructing things terribly lost. In a somewhat broader and characteristically renewalist sense, moreover, the novel is deeply committed to reconstructing, as in the Great House story, the possibilities of meaning, communication, and inter-subjective "entertainment" in the face of trauma and the contingency and isolation of existence. This is clearly reflected, for instance, on the level of plot structure. The novel consists of the stories of five unrelated narrators who have led very different lives in different parts of the world and in different times. And yet, these stories, unbeknown to their narrators, are intricately related to each other, complement each other, and lend significance to each other; in fact, together, they make up a single "Great House," which is Krauss's novel. Interestingly, moreover, the ways in which the various "stories"—pun intended—of this Great House are connected and open up on each other may very well be demonstrated by tracing the history of Mr. Weisz's lost desk, which features more or less prominently in all but one of the novel's storylines. Indeed, where in *The History of Love* it is an obscure work of fiction that serves to connect all characters and histories in Krauss's novel, a very similar function is fulfilled in *Great House* by this desk.

At the start of the novel, the desk was until recently in possession of the American writer Nadia, who is telling her story to an unidentified man lying unconscious in a hospital bed and whom she addresses as "Your Honor." Nadia recounts how she had once gotten the desk from a Chilean poet named Daniel Varsky, who would later get arrested and probably

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Holocaust: Narrative and the Consequences of Interpretation (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990), 85–86.

murdered by the Pinochet junta. Recently, however, she has given the desk to a young woman named Leah Weisz, who claims to be Varsky's daughter and had asked about her father's desk. In the chapters recounted by Arthur Bender, however, the desk is the cherished possession of his wife, the writer and Holocaust survivor Lotte Berg. Arthur confesses how he had always resented Lotte's desk, because it had been a gift from a former lover of Lotte's and its presence in their home served to remind Arthur of the secrets and mysteries he knew his wife kept from him and whose contours he is able to perceive only by accident near the end of Lotte's life. At that point, he will understand why one day almost thirty years earlier Lotte had given away the desk to Daniel Varsky, who she hardly knew but had recently been calling upon her. Shortly after the death of his wife, Arthur is visited by Mr. Weisz about the desk, and it is through Arthur being able to tell Mr. Weisz about Daniel Varsky that Weisz, in turn, is able to send his daughter Leah to New York to retrieve the desk from Nadia. However, as the chapter narrated by Weisz reveals, Leah does not obey her father's instructions, but decides to hide the desk from her father and put it in storage. Not much later, though, Weisz is nonetheless able to locate the desk there, and the novel ends with Weisz narrating the moment when he sits down at his father's desk again after more than fifty years. Yet by that time, it has also become clear through the story of Isabel, an American graduate student preparing a dissertation on English literature at Oxford University (UK), that Leah's filial disobedience and, afterwards, Weisz's finding the desk would have extensive and dramatic repercussions. Isabel's story is about how she fell in love with the Israeli Yoav Weisz and spent an exciting seven months living with him and his sister Leah in a big Victorian house in London, filled with antique furniture. But her account also reveals how, after Leah's visit to New York, a terrible silence arose between Mr. Weisz and his children, and how, not much later, Mr. Weisz commited suicide.

There is only one storyline of Krauss's novel which is not directly related to Weisz's desk, and yet these chapters are also intricately related to the other parts of the novel. They are narrated by an aging Israeli man named Aaron and concern his troubled relationship with his son Dov, who has recently come back to Israel from the UK to attend his mother's funeral. At the moment of telling his story, Aaron is in fact waiting through the night for Dov to come home. However, because Dov is identified in his father's story as a successful lawyer, it appears that he is the direct addressee, the "Your Honor," of Nadia's story: after giving her desk to Leah, Nadia travels to Israel, where in the middle of the night she got involved in a car

accident, running over a man standing in the street. Now, this man is lying unconscious in hospital, and Nadia is obeying the nurse's instructions, the novel's opening words: "[*t*]*alk to him*" (3, italics in original). Through Nadia and her story, then, the story of Aaron is connected as closely to the other stories in the novel as they are connected to each other through Weisz's desk. In fact, each of the novel's stories assumes greater significance in relation to the others, its narrators collaborating in creating one story (as Foer's Alex would put it), even as they inhabit different rooms within the "Great House" that is Krauss's novel.

Significantly, however, it is not just matters of plot that hold together the different "stories" of Krauss's "Great House." In a sense, the plot structure only constitutes the exterior part of Krauss's exploration of the "Great House" metaphor, while a subtle thematic and symbolic coherence between the novel's various individual stories represents its carefully furnished interior design: indeed, each of the various stories the novel is comprised of represents efforts to construct and inhabit metaphorical or fictive "great houses." That is to say, through their stories, the five narrators try to give meaning to their lives, to symbolically reconstruct and work through the losses they have experienced, as well as to establish a sense of "entertainment" with loved ones and/or others. Moreover, the problematics involved in such efforts to construct "great houses" are explored through a triangle of interrelated themes and motifs which in one way or another surface in each of the novel's stories: a profound concern with furniture and actual houses, with literature and the fictive, and with loss and (historical) trauma, in particular the Holocaust. For brevity's sake, I will not discuss how this constellation of themes and motifs is involved in all of the five narrators' efforts to construct a great house. Instead, I will focus on their treatment in one the novel's stories: that of Arthur Bender and his wife Lotte.

Arthur's story about Lotte is a story of love. Still, this story is also haunted by a painful mystery and a profound sense of incommunicability or trauma at the heart of Arthur and Lotte's relationship. As Arthur repeats on several occasions in his story, Lotte was a mystery to him, a mystery he was never able to fully fathom. Studying his wife like the scholar he is, Arthur realizes that Lotte's mysteries have to do with the great losses that she suffered as a result of the Holocaust: Lotte is a German Jew who managed to get to England as a chaperone to a Kindertransport, but her family was left behind and did not survive the slaughter. They never discuss this past—in fact, Lotte shields it from Arthur—but nonetheless, Arthur "took comfort in those little islands I discovered in her, islands

that I could always find, no matter how poor the conditions, and use to orient myself" (79). Yet the fact that Arthur and Lotte have managed to find a *modus vivendi* does not mean that the darkness at the heart of Lotte's life and her relationship with Arthur has been rendered harmless. In that respect, their relationship is powerfully symbolized by Lotte's daily swimming routine in one of the ponds in Hampstead Heath, where Arthur would watch her from a bench: "[e]very morning she would go, as Persephone went down, to touch again that dark thing, vanishing into the black depths. In front of my eyes! And I could never follow" (267). Thus, Arthur remains ever aware of—and troubled by—the dark secrets Lotte keeps from him. Indeed, those secrets continue to cast their shadow across their relationship.

This is symbolized most powerfully by the effects that Lotte's desk has on Arthur. To Arthur, Lotte's desk, which was a gift from a previous lover, is an oppressive and negative force that underlines the unbridgeable distance that separates him from his wife. When he first laid eyes on it in Lotte's apartment somewhere in the late 40s or early 50s, the desk struck him as "something else entirely. In that simple, small room it overshadowed everything else like some sort of grotesque, threatening monster, clinging to most of one wall and bullying the other pathetic bits of furniture to the far corner, where they seemed to cling together, as if under some sinister magnetic force" (83). The desk, the only trace in Lotte's life of a former lover, breeds a latent sense of jealousy in Arthur, because it represents a part of her life that she does not allow him to enter. But it does not just inspire the jealousy of a lover who realizes he has not been his mistress' only love. Over time, it becomes a symbol of much darker secrets of Lotte's life, whose presence Arthur can sense but not their meaning or import. The desk indeed comes to stand between Arthur and Lotte as the representative of a terrible absence, but also of their fundamental incapacity to communicate across it. Resenting for that reason its presence, Arthur likens the desk to that "of a medieval sorcerer" (83), and refers to it as "a Trojan horse" (86), "that monstrous thing" (103), and as a "beast" (103). After Lotte's death, he explains to Weisz that "[w]e lived in its shadow. As if she had been lent to me from out of its darkness, I said, to which she would always belong. … As if death itself were living in that tiny room with us, threatening to crush us" (277–278).

It is only at the end of Lotte's life and after her death that Arthur by chance is able to trace better the true contours of the secrets that Lotte has so carefully shielded him from: it appears that before meeting Arthur, Lotte had a child whom she had given away for an illegal adoption. Superficially,

of course, this knowledge to a certain extent resolves the mystery of the desk and why she had given it to Daniel Varsky. Arthur now understands that the desk must have belonged to the father of Lotte's child, and that Varsky must have reminded her of her son: "he would have been almost exactly the same age as her child" (103). Yet in the first place, the effect of this knowledge on Arthur is a profoundly unsettling sense of shock. "What she had done, the cold-bloodedness of it filled me with horror, a horror amplified by the fact that I had lived with her for so long without having the faintest idea of what she was capable. Everything she had ever said to me I now had to consider in this new light" (271). The awareness of this terrible secret forces Arthur to radically reconsider the nature of his relationship with Lotte, and to face the painful fact that their relationship in a certain sense has not been what he imagined it was—or rather, that he has always known this but preferred to ignore it.

Arthur's effort to reconstruct in memory his relationship with his wife is a painful undertaking that forces him to confront the intrinsic imperfection of their love, or the sense in which their love was a fiction. Thus, he wishes to fault Lotte with her "intolerable stoicism, which made it impossible for me to ever be truly needed by her in the most profound ways a person can need another, a need that often goes by the name of love" (256). Yet in formulating his complaint, he also comes to a more sober and wizened understanding of Lotte. He realizes that the way in which Lotte fostered a radical self-sufficiency and stoicism was the only way for her not to succumb to the traumas that beset her. Significantly, Arthur now clearly perceives that not he but her *writing* played a crucial part in that process:

> [n]o matter how bleak or tragic her stories were, their effort, their creation, could only ever be a form of hope, a denial of death or a howl of life in the face of it. And I had no place in that. … [I]t was that work that allowed her to survive, not my care or company. All our lives I'd insisted that it was she who was dependent on me. … But in truth it was I who needed to feel needed. (256)

Paradoxically, however, it is precisely by reconstructing their relationship in these unflattering terms that Arthur is able to see that there always was a rift between him and Lotte and that the precarious sense of "entertainment" he enjoyed with her was possible *because* of that rift, not in spite of it: "[a]ll my life I had been trying to imagine myself into her skin. Imagine myself into her loss. Trying and failing. Only perhaps—how can I say this—perhaps I *wanted* to fail. Because it kept me going. My love for her was a failure of the imagination" (272, italics in original). Indeed, Arthur realizes

that the rift that separated him from Lotte was actually much deeper than he had ever imagined, but in a paradoxical as well as characteristically renewalist sense, it is also precisely his inability and perhaps deep down his unwillingness to fully fathom that rift that made possible his love for her. What Arthur calls his "failure of the imagination" is not so much a failure, then; rather it represents a (pragmatist) understanding that what made his life with Lotte valuable and beautiful was not its perfection, but rather his inevitably fallible and fictive efforts to make it so. Accordingly, when Weisz at end of his visit to Arthur writes down the name of the man who once gave the desk to Lotte, Arthur spends a long time staring at the folded piece of paper without reading it. "At last, near midnight, I picked up the folded paper from the table. Without hesitating, I dropped it into the fire. It singed and burst into flames, for a moment the fire roared with new life, and in an instant it was consumed" (281). Understanding at last that his relationship with Lotte was possible only as an imperfect union based on incomplete communication and the persistence of secrets—in short, as a fiction—Arthur decides that even after her death the name of her child's father should remain unknown. This decision, in a sense an act of "entertainment," is in fact repeated by the novel itself, as the identity of Lotte's lover or how he got into possession of the desk is never revealed.

In the novel's other stories too, the motifs of houses and furniture, the memory of trauma and Holocaust, and literature and fictive investments continually recur and intersect. Of course, all these themes coincide most literally and unequivocally in the story of Mr. Weisz, whose business in antique furniture lost in the Holocaust is closely intertwined with creating in his new home in Jerusalem an exact copy of his father's study in Budapest—a copy so perfect that with just a minor effort of the imagination it would amount to exactly the same thing. Yet in Isabel's story, furniture, the Holocaust, and reconstruction are also closely related to each other. Interestingly, she at one point mentions that the house she inhabits with Mr. Weisz's children is close to the place where Sigmund Freud lived after fleeing the Nazis in 1938. Indeed, she points out how all of Freud's belongings were shipped to London where an exact copy of Freud's study in Vienna was reassembled that can be visited today (110). On another occasion, she recounts her visit with Yoav to one of Mr. Weisz's contacts, a man whose appearance, she feels, is strikingly similar to Heinrich Himmler's, one of Hitler's most ruthless henchmen. Moreover, she recounts how during this visit she stumbles upon a room of stored furniture, which she somehow associates with images she has seen of the Warsaw Ghetto and of furniture and household items of Jews confiscated by the Nazis (155–156).

Ultimately, however, Isabel's story, which is indeed full of references to houses and furniture, is an attempt to reconstruct the history and prehistory of her relationship with Yoav, which involves a number of unspeakable mysteries that concern Yoav's traumatic family history. It appears that it is only by Isabel's (fictive) effort of narrative reconstruction that she is able to accept the presence of these mysteries and to make sense of their relationship, which has become urgent, it is hinted at, because Isabel has recently become the mother of Yoav's child.

Though historical trauma is less clearly a presence in the stories of Nadia and Aaron, both furniture and houses as well as literature and fictive investments again appear here as crucial motifs. Aaron's story, for instance, is prompted by Dov's unexpected homecoming and their efforts to live together under one roof after a long separation. Presently awaiting Dov's return from a nighttime stroll, Aaron rehearses the many complaints he wants to address to his son. However, it is precisely while imagining this ultimate confrontation that Aaron is able to see for the first time that his heated emotions do not actually stem from a sense of estrangement but from powerful feelings of fatherly love and devotion. And so, what started as the preparations to a final showdown between opponents, ends, after a process of narrative reconstruction, with a powerful sense of connectedness or "entertainment" despite differences. In Nadia's story, finally, literature and furniture have quite negative connotations. As a writer of literature, she ever heeded the call of her desk, whereby she managed to completely isolate herself from others. After a desperate flight to Israel, moreover, she made things even worse by running over a man in a (stolen) car. And yet, Krauss suggests that at this tragic low-point, it is precisely in storytelling, or the fictive, that the possibilities for a new beginning might be discerned. Indeed, as Nadia is sitting by the bed of an unconscious judge in a Jerusalem hospital room, the only possibility of action available to her is storytelling. Intending to "sit by your side for as long as they let me, until your true wife or lover arrived. … For a thousand and one nights, I thought. More," Nadia decides to tell the story of her life (238). In doing so, she is able for the first time to reach a sense of critical perspective on her life, effectively judging herself and assuming responsibility. This is in fact one sense in which Nadia's story clearly has a moral component—even if Nadia may be trying, like Scheherazade, to save her own skin. Ultimately, however, the extent to which Nadia's account is self-serving is really beside the point. Indeed, what is more interesting is the possibility that moral value might inhere in Nadia's account precisely in the fact that it is an act of storytelling. That is to say, like Scheherazade's, it is an effort

of last resort, predicated on the faint but nonetheless significant possibility that her story—as a potentially endless flow of words—might effectuate a sense of communication and as such a restoration of a moral order.

In short, this constellation of themes and motifs serves to illustrate the ways in which these various narrators seek, in often quite similar ways, to reconstruct and make sense of the past and of their relationships to others. That is to say, in narrating their stories, they do not manage to fully reconstitute the past, but rather to achieve a sense of symbolic reconstruction or working through; similarly, they do not manage to establish a kind of perfect communion, but they are able, rather, to construct a sense of fragile "entertainment." In these ways, then, they also demonstrate a more fundamental concern of the novel, which is with the possibilities of creating a kind of "Great House." Taken strictly, of course, such an aim ultimately depends upon a certain faith in a Messianic promise that cannot ever be realized (at least in this world). But in fact, what the novel appears to suggest is of a remarkably pragmatist and renewalist nature: it demonstrates not only how a sense of meaning and entertainment emerges precisely in the fictive efforts of its narrators' storytelling, but through its very composition it also presents *itself* as the "Great House" constituted by its narrators' stories. That is to say, the promise of symbolic reconstruction and renewal that motivates Mr. Weisz's story of the "Great House," the idea that "if every Jewish memory were put together, every last holy fragment joined up again as one, the House would be built again," is realized by Krauss's novel itself—not in reality but precisely as fiction. In such a way, the novel suggests that the Messianic hope and moral and epistemological optimism that animates Mr. Weisz's story of the Great House can only exist as fiction. Still, that is neither a dismissal of these sentiments, nor of fiction itself. To the contrary, Krauss's *Great House*—as well as, indeed, the other novels discussed in this chapter—seem in fact to call precisely for a revaluation of literature as part of a broader effort of moral and epistemological renewal and reorientation after postmodernism.

This may seem a hopelessly naive, even pathetically quixotic suggestion in an age in which "quality" literature seems increasingly pressurized to the point of cultural marginalization. Yet is has been my point throughout this chapter that these authors' works offer not so much a traditional vindication of "literariness" but rather of the "fictive." That is to say, they show that it is precisely literature's fictive capacity to invent, to construct, to imagine, etcetera, that represents a mode of thought that is particularly useful and significant at the present historical juncture, an era after postmodernism. Or in more specific terms, they demonstrate that

literature offers a means of again addressing perennial questions of experience—questions of morality, faith, identity, the past, etcetera—that under postmodernism seemed to have become unanswerable or even impossible. Clearly, after postmodernism the point is not and can no longer be to offer definitive answers to such questions. However, after postmodernism, it is precisely fiction that is able to re-affirm and rejuvenate the (lasting) significance of such questions as well as to explore ways of addressing them and beginning to make sense of them.

In this respect, it is particularly significant that Chabon, Foer, and Krauss's renewalism is explored in close relationship to the memory of the Holocaust. For many postmodernists the memory of the Holocaust arguably served as a prime motivator of a project of radical decentering, destabilization, and deconstruction, as well as a reminder of the necessity of such a project. Yet these authors refer to the Holocaust precisely as they search for more constructive ways of making sense. From Chabon's celebration of escapism and entertainment in *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*, to Foer's exploitation of radical means of storytelling and invention in *Everything Is Illuminated*, and Krauss's hopeful exploration of the possibilities of literary and fictive reconstruction in *The History of Love* and *Great House*: the Holocaust is a central point of departure precisely in the search for the possibilities of reconstruction and working through.[43] What is significant is that this ambition to reconstruct and work through is neither motivated by a facile desire to "move on" and let the past be the past, nor, more generally, by a naive or even reactionary yearning to return to "normal" again and dismiss postmodernism as a passing fad. On the contrary, these authors have themselves come of age in a period of postmodern deconstruction and iconoclasm and as such postmodernism is an inherent part of their intellectual outlook. Yet they are reminded precisely by the memory of the Holocaust that it is irresponsible to continue to live in the postmodern desert without any alternative means of making sense of the world. It is from an at once profoundly postmodern and post-Holocaust perspective, then, that these authors propose new means of signification, even as both history and postmodernism remind them that "full" protection is impossible and, consequently, that their reconstructions can never be more than pragmatic *fictions*.

Surprisingly, however, it is also precisely these authors' awareness of the fictiveness of their constructions that breeds a certain resilience: like Foer's

43 From a Jewish perspective, one might in fact be tempted to describe these efforts as a form of "tikkun olam"—mending the world.

Wisps of Ardisht, they realize that by placing their trust in sheer ingenuity, and in pragmatic fictions rather than in absolutes, there remains ever the possibility of working on the future. Paradoxically, perhaps, it is through such an understanding that Chabon, Foer, and Krauss restore to literature some of the broader social, moral, and epistemological significance and potential it seems to have lost in recent decades. As such, the point is not that literature would make the world a better place, but rather that it ensures that a better world remains an imaginable reality.

Afterword

An American Story

In his recent work *The End of the Holocaust*, the eminent scholar Alvin Rosenfeld warned that "the image of the Holocaust is continually being transfigured, and the several stages of its transfiguration, which one can trace throughout popular culture, may contribute to a fictional subversion of the historical sense rather than a firm consolidation of accurate, verifiable knowledge." Indeed, Rosenfeld fears that the resultant "fictionalization of the Holocaust [carries] with it the potential to reshape the actors and events of the past to suit present-day fantasies."[1] On the face of it, it might seem that the worst of Rosenfeld's concerns are materialized in the recent Holocaust-inflected fiction of Jewish American authors like Michael Chabon, Jonathan Safran Foer, Nicole Krauss, and Nathan Englander: if there is one thing that characterizes this writing, it is an unabashedly fictional, often radically imaginative treatment of the Holocaust in which "present-day fantasies" as a rule of thumb trump the requirements of historical faithfulness and accuracy. In fact, their insistent reliance on *fiction* in confronting the Holocaust is one of the foremost characteristics that mark this writing as part of an emerging discourse of Holocaust impiety.

The most flagrant example of this "impious" approach might be Michael Chabon's *The Yiddish Policemen's Union*—an alternative history in which the Holocaust never happened and the Jews of Europe have managed to set up a new life in a Yiddish-speaking Alaska. As Chabon told the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in an interview, he was not unaware of some of the complications of writing fiction about the Holocaust from a contemporary American perspective. In fact, he points out that he has wrestled much with the question of "how much of a right do I have to

1 Alvin H. Rosenfeld, *The End of the Holocaust* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2011), 15, 30.

quote unquote 'use' the Holocaust for fictional purposes? You know, is it okay for me to write about the Holocaust, having had no direct personal experience of it whatsoever?"[2] However, he came to the conclusion that his purpose, ultimately, is "trying to tell stories." Indeed, in a fascinating pronouncement that I already quoted in the introduction of this study, Chabon notes that "I think in *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* I tried to use my imagination to undo at least some of the effects of the Holocaust, and to imagine a way out of the catastrophe. And again, I suspect that part of the force that drives that novel is the consciousness that ultimately that's a tragically futile wish." If some critics may find this perspective shocking or even offensive, they will find no comfort in thinking Chabon an eccentric. In fact, Chabon suggests—rightly, I think—that his wish to escape from history through fiction is not something that interests only him, but is part of a larger trend: indeed, it "is part of the legacy of my generation following the Holocaust—to have those powerful feelings of wishing it were not so, wishing it could be undone, and trying to understand how it did happen, partly in order to go through that process of wishing it otherwise."

At first sight, Chabon's efforts to "tell stories, "to undo … the effects of the Holocaust" through his imagination, and "to imagine a way out of the catastrophe" may indeed seem to recall precisely the "fictional subversion" that concerns Rosenfeld so much. I would suggest, however, that they are representative, rather, of a much more complex cultural dynamic. Indeed, it has been among my central concerns in this study to demonstrate that the insistently fictional and therefore "impious" approaches to the Holocaust of these relatively young Jewish American authors do not so much subvert the Holocaust. Instead, they serve precisely to negotiate a more productive relationship toward this deeply disturbing yet also increasingly distant history. Indeed, in the first place, these authors' Holocaust impiety is instrumental in fostering new ways of engaging with this history from a specifically contemporary and American perspective. Second, their Holocaust impiety is also central to diverse "postethnic" explorations and renewals of Jewish history, culture, and identity. And third, it informs broader efforts to move beyond a certain impasse in contemporary postmodernism, and to establish more positive forms of signification on a pragmatist basis. These multifaceted and complex negotiations with the memory of the Holocaust do not so much testify to a receding awareness

2 Michael Chabon, interview by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, March 13, 2008, https://ushmm.org/museum/exhibit/focus/antisemitism/voices/transcript/index.php?content=20080313.

or significance of the Holocaust in contemporary (Jewish) America—on the contrary. What *is* significant about them, however, is that they take place at all levels on fundamentally American and contemporary terms.

Literature and especially fiction about the Holocaust have traditionally been regarded with profound skepticism and distrust. Elie Wiesel, for instance, has categorically proclaimed that "there is no such thing as Holocaust literature—there cannot be. Auschwitz negates all literature as it negates all theories and doctrines. … To substitute words, any words for it, is to distort it." As Wiesel sees it, any imaginative or literary attempt to represent the Holocaust is suspect, because it can only fall short of what reality was like; indeed, "[w]hoever has not lived through the event can never know it. And whoever has lived through it can never fully reveal it."[3] This would place authors like Chabon, Foer, Krauss, and Englander, who were born in the US decades after World War II, in a very difficult position with regard to understanding the Holocaust. Clearly, these authors cannot pretend to know the Holocaust in the same way as the survivors. However, it is to be questioned if the only possible way to know the Holocaust is restricted to the perspective of the survivors. This would in fact seem to seriously misconstrue the very ways in which knowledge of the past is established and mediated. One knows about ancient Egypt not by becoming an ancient Egyptian, but by forging a relationship to that history from one's position in the present. Similarly, the very distance that exists between these Jewish American authors and the Holocaust—a distance that is at once temporal, geographical, as well as cultural—does not mean that these authors cannot know or relate to the Holocaust at all. Instead, it is precisely *as* contemporary Jewish American authors, to whom the Holocaust is such a distant event, that these writers can begin to make sense of this history.

In fact, this is precisely what explains Chabon, Foer, Krauss, and Englander's insistence on an intensely fictional approach to the Holocaust. In what is a characteristically American conceit, it is *fiction*, as an essentially utopian, ahistorical, and idealistic discourse of invention, that allows these authors to engage with the Holocaust at all. Holocaust literature to them is not so much an impossibility; instead, it is precisely the imaginative and distanced nature of fiction that speaks powerfully to these authors' own relationship to the Holocaust and which offers them significant—yet indelibly contemporary and American—opportunities and possibilities to

3 Elie Wiesel, "A Plea for the Surivors," in *A Jew Today* (New York: Vintage, 1979), 234.

come to terms with it. Thus, these authors employ what are traditionally felt to be the limitations of fiction not to gain "full" knowledge of the past, but instead to relate to history from their own distanced position in the American present. That is to say, they forge a tenuous and paradoxical connection to the Holocaust by exploring in fiction the many ways in which they are separated from it.

In this respect, Chabon's comments on *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* are particularly instructive. Chabon relates that he tries to escape from history through fiction in full knowledge of the fact that this is "a tragically futile wish"; indeed, the impossible "wishing it could be undone," which he suggests informs Jewish American fiction about the Holocaust more generally is at the same time an effort of "trying to understand how it did happen, partly in order to go through that process of wishing it otherwise." With characteristically American idealism, Chabon suggests that even if fiction would be an intrinsically impoverished or even improper means of confronting the Holocaust, something else—something valuable—may nonetheless still be gained through this impossible encounter with history. That is to say, these fictional engagements with, or even escapes from, the Holocaust may be inadequate as *history*; still, they may foster a sense of resilience and working through in the present, in the face of an overwhelmingly tragic history. Indeed, even when these Jewish American fictions try to come to terms with the full scale of destruction wrought by the Holocaust, the past is ultimately not allowed to paralyze the present. Instead, it is admitted only in as far as it is able to inform the (American) future.

As eminently American(ized), "ahistorical," and fictional encounters with the Holocaust, these writings clearly challenge the received conventions of discourse about the Holocaust. But they are emphatically not instances of a callous insensitivity. In fact, as Matthew Boswell suggests, "the art of Holocaust impiety stems from emotions and questions that could only arise from a generation that had been deeply affected by the atrocities that are figured within their often unsettling artworks."[4] The central and recurrent place that the Holocaust assumes in contemporary Jewish American writing is indeed a mark of how this history has in recent decades become increasingly important and in fact central to Jewish American identity. At the same time, though, this fiction demonstrates that it is not so much the past itself—that of the Holocaust, or indeed any past—but

4 Matthew Boswell, *Holocaust Impiety in Literature, Popular Music, and Film* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 34.

rather the opportunities and possibilities of contemporary American life itself that ultimately determine the shape even of such a Holocaust-centered Jewish American identity.

One of the key elements that marks the work of Chabon, Foer, Krauss, and Englander, as Jewish is precisely the salient presence in it of the memory Holocaust. In this work, the Holocaust is often elemental to broader explorations of other Jewish histories. And in such a way, it serves as a key point of departure for reflections on what it means to be Jewish in America today. And yet, in the same way that the history of the Holocaust to these authors can only be related to from an inevitably contemporary American perspective—that is, as a matter of fiction—the issue of Jewishness, too, is essentially an open question, to be answered as one pleases. Thus, Chabon in *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* presents a fully invented and imaginary Jewish American shtetl. Similarly, Jonathan, the protagonist in Foer's *Everything Is Illuminated*, unable to connect to any "real" Jewish family history, decides to invent one from scratch and in strikingly fantastic ways. Such approaches to Jewish history and identity may also be characterized as profoundly impious, for they are eminently willing to disregard any of the rules of Jewish tradition, even as they seek to connect with it. They represent processes of identity formation that take shape on the basis of optionality, free and individualist self-invention, and freedom from any hindering claims of tradition. Indeed, depending ultimately on fiction-making, they represent a paradigmaticallyAmerican take on identity. Significantly, however, this fictional and American approach to Jewish identity does not result in anything that is in principle any less *Jewish*. Instead, what emerges is a process of identity formation that keeps within reach all of the values, meanings, and practices that have traditionally been cherished by Jews; but it also allows the creation of new ones, as well as the free choice to disregard or discard all of those elements that have estranged people from the Jewish tradition in the past. Though the Holocaust-inflected work of these Jewish American authors engages with Jewishness on these deeply idealistic and American terms, theorized by David Hollinger as postethnic, this does not mean that it offers merely a travesty of Jewish culture and identity. Instead, it represents a very liberal and capacious embrace of it—yet an embrace that operates not on the basis of tradition, but on that of the endless freedom of (self-)invention offered, precisely, by fiction.

Remarkably, then, these authors' embrace of Jewishness on the basis of fiction-making and self-invention, as well as their embrace of fiction in the face of the Holocaust bespeak an unusual trust in the power of words and, indeed, the power of fiction in the postmodern absence of

traditional certainties. After postmodernism exerted its energies on deconstructing and destabilizing those old certainties, these authors are now strongly committed to explore new possibilities of meaning and signification. Through their writing, Chabon, Foer, Krauss, and Englander suggest that the absence or loss of all of the traditional foundations of knowledge and morality that marks the contemporary postmodern condition does not ultimately signify the absence of meaning as such. Instead, the deconstructive consequences of postmodernism, which these authors fully underwrite, signal to them a need to *create* meaning where there was none. And they suggest this is to be done not by raising new foundations, but through essentially imaginative and pragmatist inventions: in fictions that lack objective grounds, but are useful and helpful nonetheless in making sense of the world. Thus, Brod, Jonathan's great-great-great-grandmother in Foer's *Everything Is Illuminated*, comes to realize that "if there is no love in the world, we will make a new world. … Love me, because love doesn't exist, and I have tried everything that does." In fact, together with her stepfather Yankel, she decides to "willfully [play] the parts they wrote for themselves, willfully creating and believing fictions necessary for life."[5]

Strikingly, the memory of the Holocaust is closely intertwined with these post-postmodern, renewalist efforts, and can in fact be seen as one of their central motivators. What is key here is the apparent risk that the Holocaust's very absence and distance from contemporary American life, and the perceived impossibility of its representation would effectively lead to its forgetting. To these authors, however, this is not only unacceptable, but also unnecessary. Indeed, their writing proposes that through an imaginative investment in fiction, the forces of oblivion can be countered, while the distance between themselves and this history can nonetheless be respected—or rather, be explored and exploited as an integral part of the indelibly contemporary process of remembering itself. It is on the same logic and in the wake of these engagements with the Holocaust that these authors also reclaim as "impossible possibilities"—that is, as *fictions*—such notions as meaning, morality and ethics, knowledge, and communication: concepts that were felt to have become deeply fraught or even untenable under postmodernism, but of which it turned out that we could scarcely do without. As such, they seek to reinvent and vindicate a sense of hope in an age of all-consuming irony.

These Jewish American writers' renewalism and the logic of the fictive that operates in their works may have been triggered by the memory of the

5 Jonathan Safran Foer, *Everything Is Illuminated* (London: Penguin, 2003), 82, 83.

Holocaust, and may have been necessary as a response to a certain crisis in contemporary postmodernism. But this eminently hopeful, idealistic approach is also rooted in a long American tradition and indeed employs a fundamentally American logic. In fact, it operates to a considerable extent on the basis of a pragmatist perspective—which is of course a characteristically American response to problems of epistemology and ethics. But there seem to be even older continuities as well. In a manner that is at once eminently idealistic as well highly practical and utilitarian—indeed, in the tradition of a Utopia Achieved, as Baudrillard would have it—these authors' renewalism proposes that through sheer human imagination and inventiveness, new and better realities may be created out of nothing but words and the stuff of fiction. This is not to say so much that *literature* per se would be able to perform this task (which was in fact the view of the Romantics). The point is rather that the same imaginative, creative, and essentially moral force that operates par excellence in literature and fiction is essential to the larger project of making life itself meaningful and worth living in a context when previously taken for granted meanings and values can no longer be found to speak for themselves. One might object that in a post-Holocaust, postmodern and globalized world, and in view of the mighty challenges such a world faces, this a strikingly naive position. But this is to ignore that it is precisely on such a—textual, fictive, idealistic, and utopian—basis that America came into existence in the first place, and on such a basis that it has continued to make sense of the world ever since.

As Alan Mintz notes in his incisive study on American popular culture and the Holocaust, "the career of the Holocaust in America is an American story"; "[a]t the center of the drama is the spectacle of a formidable cultural system struggling with a tragic event alien to its nature and proceeding through stages of denial to an accommodation with the event on its own terms."[6] These are wise words, especially because this crucial process of the Americanization of the Holocaust is so often belittled and dismissed. However, by emphasizing the pervasive "Americanism" of the Holocaust-inflected writing of Chabon, Foer, Krauss, and Englander, I do not mean to reduce this fiction to mere products of one single operative trope. The point is rather that these authors' diverse explorations of the Holocaust, pervaded as they are by so many other concerns, are meaningful precisely as efforts to relate to the Holocaust from an indelibly contemporary and American perspective. We may of course be scandalized by

6 Alan Mintz, *Popular Culture and the Shaping of Holocaust Memory in America* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2001), ix, 82.

these authors' many impieties, or embarrassed by their various efforts at renewal. But this is ultimately to remain blind to the much more intricate and meaningful connections between their engagements with the Holocaust, their explorations of (postethnic) Jewish identity, and their post-postmodern renewalism. Indeed, as in many ways impious, Jewish American, Holocaust-inflected fiction, the work of these authors ultimately signals not so much the "end of the Holocaust" that alarms Alvin Rosenfeld so much, nor the end of Jewish identity, or the end of meaning itself. Instead, it rather demonstrates a strong commitment to developing renewed forms of historical, cultural, and moral signification in a twenty-first century American context in which, until recently, this had seemed to have become all but impossible. Concerned as much with impiety as with *renewal*, then, each of these fictions tells a very American story indeed.

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Samenvatting in het Nederlands

Ruim vijfenzestig jaar na het einde van de Tweede Wereldoorlog bestaat er in de Verenigde Staten een levendige herinneringscultuur rondom de geschiedenis van de Jodenvervolging door de Nazi's, oftewel de Holocaust. Zo wordt de herinnering aan deze geschiedenis in leven gehouden door een welhaast eindeloze stroom aan films, TV-series, toneelstukken, en romans over de Holocaust, door vele monumenten en musea, door onderwijsprogramma's op allerlei niveaus, en door reizen naar "plaatsen der herinnering" in Europa. Hoewel het onmiskenbaar is dat de Holocaust hierdoor "veramerikaniseerd" is (wat door vele critici als bezwaarlijk wordt beschouwd), is deze geschiedenis ook in de Verenigde Staten lang met een zekere eerbiedigheid of "piëteit" benaderd. Zowel "hoge" als "lage" cultuuruitingen hebben de Holocaust afgeschilderd als een catastrofe van (bijna) onvoorstelbare omvang, die latere generaties vervult met een uitgesproken afschuw voor de gepleegde misdaden en een diep respect voor de doden. Deze cultuuruitingen beschouwen de Holocaust vaak als onuitspreekbaar en onbeschrijfbaar, en ze benadrukken daarom vaak het belang van de stilte. Het is echter belangrijk vast te stellen dat deze "eerbiedige" vorm van Holocaustrepresentatie niet de enig mogelijke variant is. Er is ook altijd een kleine onderstroom geweest in het kunstzinnige discours over de Holocaust die de nadruk op stilte en onbeschrijfbaarheid als beklemmend en beperkend heeft ervaren. Deze afwijkende benadering heeft er juist voor gekozen heeft om de Holocaust op een "oneerbiedige" wijze te verbeelden, zonder daarmee de geschiedenis te willen bagatelliseren laat staan ontkennen. Vanaf het einde van de jaren negentig heeft deze oneerbiedige vorm van Holocaustkunst, die vaak uitgesproken speels, komisch en humoristisch is, een aanzienlijke vlucht genomen. De Joods-Amerikaanse literatuur van de laatste tien à vijftien jaar en geschre-

ven door een nieuwe generatie van relatief jonge auteurs is hiervan een uitgesproken voorbeeld.

In het werk van schrijvers als Michael Chabon, Jonathan Safran Foer, Nicole Krauss, en Nathan Englander, die als de belangrijkste vertegenwoordigers van de nieuwe generatie Joods-Amerikaanse auteurs kunnen worden gezien, is de Holocaust een centraal en vaak terugkerend thema. Maar deze auteurs benaderen deze geschiedenis vaak op zeer speelse, komische, sterk veramerikaniseerde, en fantastische wijzen die afwijken van de conventionele vormen van Holocaustkunst. Dit proefschrift is toegelegd op de vraag hoe deze "oneerbiedige" benadering van de Holocaust door deze recente Joods-Amerikaanse literatuur geduid kan worden. Hierbij wordt beargumenteerd dat deze oneerbiedigheid niet wijst op historische dan wel morele onverschilligheid, maar dat het juist een manier vormt om hernieuwde betekenisgeving te bewerkstelligen op verschillende niveaus. Concreter gesteld functioneert deze oneerbiedige omgang met de Holocaust in de eerste plaats om de herinnering aan deze geschiedenis (opnieuw) betekenisvol te maken op manieren die passen in een eenentwintigste-eeuwse, Amerikaanse context. In de tweede plaats is deze benadering van de geschiedenis innig verweven met, en een essentieel onderdeel van, de constructie van een "post-ethnische" Joods-Amerikaanse identiteit op basis van vrijwilligheid en individuele keuzevrijheid. En in de derde plaats maakt de omgang met de Holocaust door deze auteurs onderdeel uit van een bredere zoektocht naar nieuwe en pragmatische mogelijkheden van (morele en epistemologische) zin- en betekenisgeving in de nasleep van het postmodernisme.

Zoals gezegd is de geschiedenis van de Holocaust lang beschouwd als onuitspreekbaar en onbeschrijfbaar. Om vergelijkbare redenen zijn ook juist veramerikaniseerde representaties van de Holocaust vaak met scepsis ontvangen. Maar meer dan vijfenzestig jaar na het einde van de Tweede Wereldoorlog is dit een moeilijk houdbare positie, onder meer omdat het nauwelijks mogelijkheden lijkt te bieden waarop de Holocaust in de hedendaagse Amerikaanse context herinnerd *kan* worden. Vanuit een dergelijke visie kan de hedendaagse Joods-Amerikaanse literatuur over de Holocaust die centraal staat in deze studie enkel in overwegend negatieve en afwijzende termen begrepen worden. Dit doet echter tekort aan de complexiteit van zowel deze literatuur als aan die van de (Amerikaanse) herinneringscultuur rondom de Holocaust. Daarom beoogt het eerste deel van dit proefschrift dat gewijd is aan het thema "memory" een vruchtbaarder perspectief te ontwikkelen.

In de eerste twee hoofdstukken die vooral theoretisch van aard zijn wordt betoogd dat de herinnering aan de Holocaust, en de betekenis en het

belang van deze geschiedenis, nooit voor zich spreken. In plaats daarvan worden deze in verschillende historische perioden en in verschillende geografische locaties en culturele contexten verschillend geïnterpreteerd en geconstrueerd. Dit heeft een aantal belangrijke consequenties. In de eerste plaats betekent dit dat de Holocaust niet "onuitspreekbaar" en "onbeschrijfbaar" is, zoals vele overlevenden en intellectuelen hebben beweerd; integendeel, de Holocaust kan alleen herinnerd en gekend worden door erover te spreken en te schrijven. Het alternatief is stilte en als gevolg daarvan zal op den duur de Holocaust worden vergeten. Dit inzicht over het belang en de onvermijdelijkheid van de representatie vraagt om een minder restrictieve en meer zelf-reflectieve vorm van cultuur- en literatuurwetenschap met betrekking tot de Holocaust. Van belang is niet meer om onderscheid te maken tussen "juiste" of "verkeerde" representaties van, en discoursen over de Holocaust, maar in plaats daarvan om te begrijpen hoe al deze verschillende representaties bijdragen tot verschillende culturele herinneringen aan de Holocaust.

Een tweede gevolg is dat de Amerikaanse en veramerikaniseerde omgang met de Holocaust niet in principe minderwaardig is dan andere vormen van herinnering, zoals bijvoorbeeld de professionele geschiedschrijving of getuigenissen uit de eerste hand. Amerikaanse vormen van verbeelding van de Holocaust zijn niet minder plaats- en tijdgebonden dan deze laatste twee vormen van herinnering. Géén van deze bronnen leveren directe toegang tot het verleden, maar alle produceren een bepaalde—door taal en discours gemedieerde—verhouding tot de geschiedenis. (Amerikaanse) films en romans, bijvoorbeeld, brengen slechts andere soorten kennis over het verleden dan historiografische werken of getuigenverslagen. Om Amerikaanse representaties van de Holocaust op waarde te schatten is het daarom belangrijk om de specifieke culturele en historische context waarin deze tot stand komen te beschouwen als onlosmakelijk verbonden met de manier waarop deze representaties het verleden verbeelden.

Het is vanuit dit theoretische kader dat in hoofdstuk 3 de omgang met de geschiedenis van de Holocaust door de Joods-Amerikaanse auteurs Englander, Foer, Krauss, en Chabon nader onderzocht wordt. In dit hoofdstuk demonstreer ik dat verbeelding van de Holocaust door deze schrijvers gekarakteriseerd wordt door wat ik een "dynamiek van de afstand" noem. In tegenstelling tot de literatuur van de overlevenden of het genre van de documentaire roman, benadrukt het werk van deze Joods-Amerikaanse auteurs op een veelheid aan manieren de grote fysieke, temporele, en culturele afstand die bestaat tussen hun fictie en de geschiedenis van de Holocaust zelf. Dit is een oneerbiedige benadering in zoverre dat deze

omgang met de geschiedenis op geen enkele manier tracht de historische werkelijkheid weer te geven en zo'n streven zelfs uitdrukkelijk uit de weg gaat. Zo benadrukken deze werken vaak de afwezigheid en de intrinsieke onkenbaarheid van de geschiedenis, leggen ze de nadruk op het feit dat dit hedendaagse en Amerikaanse *ficties* over de Holocaust zijn, of representeren ze de geschiedenis door gebruik te maken van komische elementen of uitgesproken fantastische verhaaltechnieken. Tegelijkertijd vormt deze dynamiek van de afstand geen knieval voor een vorm van historisch relativisme. In tegendeel, de dynamiek van de afstand is een manier om zoveel jaren na de Holocaust in het reine te komen met het feit dat historische kennis nooit direct is maar altijd afhankelijk van representatie; juist door de Holocaust te verbeelden op manieren die expliciet aansluiten bij een hedendaags Amerikaans perspectief, slagen deze auteurs erin om opnieuw betekenis te geven aan deze geschiedenis en de herinnering eraan in leven te houden.

Deze intensieve, oneerbiedige en "veramerikaniseerde" benadering van de Holocaust laat niet alleen zien hoe historische herinneringen ontwikkelen en veranderen, maar zegt ook veel over de context zelf waarin deze geschiedenis herinnerd wordt. Dat wil zeggen: de omgang met de Holocaust door Joods-Amerikaanse auteurs als Chabon, Foer, Krauss, en Englander valt in hoge mate te lezen als een reflectie op hedendaagse Joods-Amerikaanse identiteit. Dit thema van Joods-Amerikaanse identiteit staat centraal in het tweede deel van dit proefschrift.

Hoewel het algemeen bekend is dat de geschiedenis van de Holocaust sinds de jaren 70 van de vorige eeuw een centrale plaats heeft ingenomen in de hedendaagse Joods-Amerikaanse identiteit, wordt een op de Holocaust georiënteerde Joodse identiteit slechts door weinigen serieus genomen. In hoofdstuk 4 betoog ik echter dat de centrale rol van de Holocaust niet noodzakelijkerwijs wijst op een oppervlakkige en uitgeholde vorm van Joodse identiteit—het laatste station vóór volledige assimilatie. Het grote belang van de Holocaust voor de Joods-Amerikaanse identiteit moet juist beschouwd worden in samenhang met veel bredere veranderingen in de constructie van deze vorm van identiteit in de laatste decennia. Waar Joods-Amerikaanse identiteit tot grofweg de jaren 60 op slechts een beperkt aantal manieren gevormd kon worden, is deze sindsdien veel meer een persoonlijke aangelegenheid geworden die op zeer vele verschillende manieren vormgegeven en beleefd wordt. In al deze verscheidenheid heeft de herinnering aan de Holocaust zich ontwikkeld tot wat Peter Novick heeft beschreven als de enig overgebleven gemene deler onder Amerikaanse Joden. Daarom wijst een op de Holocaust georiënteerde Joods-Ameri-

kaanse identiteit aan de ene kant op het feit dat strikt traditionele vormen van Joodse identiteit aan belang hebben ingeboet. Tegelijkertijd staat het ook symbool voor de vele nieuwe, onorthodoxe, en oneerbiedige manieren waarop velen hun Joodse identiteit *zelf* wensen vorm te geven en daarmee voor het feit dat velen belang blijven hechten aan hun Joods zijn.

Vervolgens laat ik in hoofdstuk 5 zien dat de omgang met de Holocaust in het werk van Chabon, Foer, Krauss, en Englander illustratief is voor de buitengewoon grote vrijheid en potentiële complexiteit waarmee Joodse identiteit wordt geconstrueerd en beleefd in hedendaags Amerika. In de fictie van deze auteurs functioneert de Holocaust als één van de meest opvallende aspecten die deze literatuur kenmerken als Joods-Amerikaans—maar zeker niet het enige. De Holocaust fungeert eerder als een belangrijk en centraal punt van vertrek en oriëntatie in veel breder uitwaaierende verkenningen van een rijke Joodse culturele, religieuze en historische traditie. Bovendien manifesteert dezelfde oneerbiedigheid waarmee deze auteurs de geschiedenis van de Holocaust benaderen zich ook in hun exploraties van deze Joodse tradities. Ook hier meten deze schrijvers zich een grote vrijheid aan en gaan zij met deze materie om precies zoals zij zelf believen. Hierbij zijn zij van harte bereid zich te laten inspireren door de Joodse wet, traditie, gebruiken, en geschiedenis, maar ook om deze nadrukkelijk links te laten liggen of al naar gelang te herschrijven. Deze zeer vrije omgang met de Joodse cultuur valt te zien als een product van postmodern Amerikaans individualisme en suggereert een vorm van identiteit die vanuit een traditioneel perspectief wellicht als een "gotspe" kan worden beschouwd. Ik betoog daarentegen dat juist deze enorme vrijheid, die zowel ruimte biedt aan traditionele vormen van Joodse identiteit als radicaal postmoderne of post-ethnische vormen, waardevol is: de fictie van deze Joods-Amerikaanse schrijvers laat zien dat, paradoxaal genoeg, de mogelijkheid van een oneerbiedige omgang met Joodse cultuur mogelijkheden biedt om Joodse identiteit blijvend nieuwe betekenis en relevantie te geven in een steeds veranderende, postmoderne samenleving.

Opvallend genoeg valt dus de oneerbiedigheid waarmee deze Joods-Amerikaanse literatuur zowel de geschiedenis van de Holocaust als het thema Joodse identiteit benadert, niet simpelweg als relativistisch af te wijzen. In tegendeel, deze oneerbiedigheid, die enerzijds zeer duidelijk de vrucht is van een postmodern perspectief, is er op gericht nieuwe vormen van positieve betekenisgeving te onderzoeken. Hierbij probeert deze literatuur anderzijds weerstand te bieden juist aan een zeker relativisme waarmee het postmodernisme de laatste jaren steeds meer in verband wordt gebracht. Het derde deel van dit proefschrift is daarom gewijd aan het post-

modernisme, en in het bijzonder de vraag in hoeverre deze Joods-Amerikaanse literatuur over de Holocaust gezien kan worden als onderdeel van een bredere serie pogingen in de hedendaagse cultuur om voorbij het postmodernisme te geraken.

Hoofdstuk 6 tracht duiding te geven aan een breed aantal recente artistieke en intellectuele ontwikkelingen in de Westerse cultuur waarin men zich lijkt af te zetten tegen het postmodernisme. Na een beschouwing over wat bedoeld kan worden met het uiterst complexe begrip "postmodernisme" wordt beschreven hoe en waarom er in de laatste jaren een zekere vermoeidheid met het postmodernisme is opgetreden. Kunstenaars en critici die zelf in grote mate door het postmoderne paradigma zijn gevormd nemen steeds vaker afstand van een (moreel en epistemologisch) relativisme dat ze als uiterste consequentie van het postmodernisme zijn gaan beschouwen. Desondanks realiseren deze kunstenaars en critici zich dat de belangrijke inzichten en lessen van het postmodernisme niet zomaar even ongedaan gemaakt of genegeerd kunnen worden. Hun worsteling bestaat daarom uit een zoektocht naar nieuwe vormen van kennis, representatie, en (morele) betekenisgeving die niet de pretentie hebben absoluut te zijn, maar die tegelijkertijd ook de valkuil van eindeloos (postmodern) relativisme omzeilen. Ik betoog dat deze oplossingen voor de postmoderne impasse begrepen kunnen worden vanuit het (Amerikaanse) pragmatisme. Net als het postmodernisme ziet het pragmatisme concepten zoals kennis en moraliteit als constructies zonder enig absoluut of transcendent waarheidsgehalte. Maar het pragmatisme benadrukt ook dat zulke historisch en cultureel bepaalde constructies wel degelijk praktische noodzaak en consequenties hebben, en dat ze dus ondanks hun beperkingen onmisbaar zijn. Voor het pragmatisme schuilt de waarde van zulke concepten niet in hun absolute waarheidsgehalte, maar in hun concrete maar gelimiteerde bruikbaarheid in praktische situaties. Zo beantwoordt het pragmatisme aan en legitimeert het de behoefte om belangrijke concepten als kennis en moraliteit te blijven gebruiken. Tegelijkertijd vermijdt het pragmatisme aan de ene kant deze concepten als algemeen geldig en absoluut te beschouwen (een "pre-postmoderne" opvatting), en aan de andere kant als niets anders dan relatieve, talige constructies (een radicaal postmoderne opvatting).

De zoektocht naar manieren om voorbij het postmodernisme te geraken en nieuwe vormen van (pragmatische) betekenisgeving te verkennen valt duidelijk waar te nemen in het werk van met name Chabon, Foer en Krauss. Hun pogingen in die richting worden bovendien tot op grote hoogte ingegeven door de herinnering aan de Holocaust. Hoofdstuk 7 laat zien dat in deze literatuur de herinnering aan deze gruwelen een belangrij-

ke impuls vormt voor het zoeken naar nieuwe vormen van (morele) betekenisgeving in een postmoderne context, waarin juist betekenis (in brede zin) een zo schaars en gecompliceerd goed is geworden. Hoewel de verschillende auteurs deze zoektocht op zeer verschillende inhoudelijke en formele manieren vormgeven, is er een opvallende overeenkomst. Ze proberen allen een zekere historische, epistemologische, en morele leegte—een gevolg van zowel een gewelddadige geschiedenis als van het postmodernisme—te weerstaan met uitdrukkelijke *ficties*. In hun werk benadrukken deze auteurs het belang van traditionele of zelfs klassiek humanistische waarden als liefde, vriendschap, verbondenheid, en intermenselijke communicatie—niet als universele waarheden, maar juist als imperfecte, contingente, menselijke verzinsels. Op karakteristiek pragmatische wijze suggereren deze auteurs daarmee dat de postmoderne leegte niet betekent dat er géén betekenis is, of dat betekenis niet (meer) mogelijk is. Hun werk benadrukt juist dat de onuitputtelijkheid van het *fictieve*, van de menselijke drang tot het *maken* van betekenis, eindeloze mogelijkheden biedt om de leegte te vullen en daarmee steeds weer tot nieuwe zin- en betekenisgeving te komen.

Het nawoord reflecteert verder op het belang van een oneerbiedige en fictieve omgang met de Holocaust door deze Joods-Amerikaanse auteurs—niet alleen in de manieren waarop ze deze geschiedenis zelf vormgeven, maar ook in verhouding tot kwesties van Joodse identiteit en de postmoderne impasse. Ik benadruk nogmaals dat deze schijnbare oneerbiedigheid niet zozeer wijst op cynisme en relativisme, maar juist op een constructieve, hoopvolle en zelfs idealistische houding. Daarom stel ik dat aan de manieren waarop deze schrijvers de Holocaust, Joodse identiteit en postmoderniteit benaderen uiteindelijk een uitgesproken Amerikaanse visie ten grondslag ligt.

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